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Aristotle's Science of Tragedy

by

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In memoriam

Christopher Q. Drummond

(1932-2001)

Abstract

I argue that in the *Poetics* Aristotle explains tragic drama according to his broader methodological and ontological principles. I first argue that in the first six chapters of the *Poetics*, Aristotle establishes a definition of the essence of tragedy as the basis of a scientific investigation. I then argue that his account of dramatic plot as a necessary sequence of events is based on his concept of relative necessity, but that it is insufficient to establish the wholeness of plot or to explain the specifically tragic effects of fear and pity. I argue finally that the account of tragic plot can be completed by appeal to hypothetical necessity and to teleological causation. In this way, the wholeness of plot and the tragic effects of pity and fear can be explained within Aristotle's systematic philosophical framework, and the *Poetics* can be seen as a more systematic treatise than is usually noted.

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Introduction

0.1 Background

Aristotle's main object of investigation in the *Poetics* is tragedy. This is partly a matter of chance; it is supposed that a second book on comedy was lost at an early stage in the transmission of the text.[1] In the book that survives, the concluding chapters (*Poetics* 23 to 26) have as their subject matter epic, but Aristotle discusses it largely by comparison with tragedy, and in *Poetics* 26 he explicitly argues that tragedy is superior to epic. Aristotle clearly considers tragedy the finest and most developed form of mimesis, and it forms the core of his discussion.

Although the surviving text does present a unifying concern with the nature of tragedy (up to the transition to the discussion of epic), modern commentators have often questioned whether it also advances a continuous argument. To some degree, this doubt can be explained by mutilations, interpolations, and transpositions that the text has suffered in the course of transmission.[2] The text is in fact hopelessly corrupt in some crucial passages, but more generally the text is simply very brief, occasionally to the point of obscurity.[3] Aristotle seems to be content at points with an outline of what could be a more extended argument, and at others he does not clearly mark when he is advancing the argument or digressing with some literary-critical observations. As a result, it has commonly been accepted that the *Poetics* is a loosely connected series of lecture notes that do not always follow logically on one another.

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[1] See Janko 1987 for a possible reconstruction of Aristotle's discussion of comedy.
[2] It is often suspected, for example, that *Poetics* 12, where there is a brief survey of the quantitative parts of an Athenian tragedy, is an interpolation.
[3] A crucial example of textual corruption occurs in *Poetics* 18 (1456a2), where Aristotle lays out four kinds of tragedy, but the name of the fourth has been lost, resulting in a long history of controversy. See the comment in Else 1967 for an especially ingenious hypothesis.

The systematic and scientific aspects of the *Poetics* have been comparatively neglected, perhaps because of the very object of study. From the time of its rediscovery in Italy in the late fifteenth century, the *Poetics* has had an enormous influence on literary criticism; initially, however, this was not so much as a philosophical study as much as in relation to literary and rhetorical treatises (most prominently Horace's *Ars Poetica*) and to debates over literary genres.[4] Within classical scholarship, it has mainly been mined for historical data on Athenian tragedy. It makes numerous references to plays both extant and lost, and has thus been the object of close attention from philologists and from literary critics for whatever interpretive insights can be gleaned into the tragedies that we still have.[5]

Philosophical attention to the *Poetics*, however, has generally been limited to treating it as subordinate to other branches of the Aristotelian system. After its rediscovery in the west in the late fifteenth century, it was usually treated as an adjunct to the *Rhetoric*, and thus viewed largely as a study in the artistic use of language or as a handbook of literary composition.[6] In modern scholarship, on the other hand, it has generally been treated as a bridge between art and ethical theory. This in turn has led to critical appraisal of existing tragedies in terms of a model that is ultimately moralistic and didactic, and which treats tragedy as a mere

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[4] See Weinberg 1961 for a complete survey of scholarship on the *Poetics* in the Renaissance; more briefly, Halliwell 1986 ch. 10 and Halliwell 1992. A more recent trend has been an attempt to recuperate the *Poetics* as a founding text of narrative theory. Lowe 2000, for example, suggests that Aristotle's theory of plot represents a scientific discovery about the way in which humans organize their own experiences and memories into coherent narratives; the reason for the success of the Aristotelian conception of plot is, according to this view, that it relies on natural cognitive processes.

[5] D. W. Lucas's commentary, for example, is largely devoted to providing parallel passages or noting the dramas and playwrights referred to, but provides little guidance on the theoretical issues raised.

[6] In the Renaissance this focus was only encouraged by Averroes' commentary (in Butterworth 1986), which was included with Aristotle's text in the earliest printed editions. Averroes was hampered by his lack of knowledge of what Greek tragedy actually was.

exemplification and illustration of ethical theory. The explication of the *Poetics* in terms of Aristotle's ethical theory is still a major theme in contemporary scholarship.[7]

I will attempt to demonstrate at least one way in which Aristotle investigates tragedy in a more rigorously scientific fashion than has usually been noted. I will argue that the *Poetics* has a clear overall progression that marks it as a coherent treatise; the treatise moreover follows the same methods and standards that Aristotle employs in his other scientific investigations. Broadly speaking, an Aristotelian treatise has the following form: the object of study is first identified according to received opinion and then brought into view as a distinct species by differentiation from related species of the same genus; this is followed by an analysis of that species into its constituent elements, after which the defining and essential element is determined and investigated; on this basis, received opinions (*endoxa*) about a species can be replaced by properly scientific knowledge (*episteme*) of it.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle follows this pattern quite closely. He begins with general or established opinions about what mimesis is, and analyzes these received opinions in order to determine what differentiates tragedy as a species of mimesis, and subsequently to establish a definition of tragedy as a distinct species of mimesis. Tragedy is found to be fundamentally the representation of an action; its essential element is therefore its plot. Because the essence constitutes the necessary properties,

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[7] See, for example, Martha Nussbaum's entry on Aristotle in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, where she writes that the *Poetics* "should be read in close connection with his ethical writings, which insist, against Plato, that good people can sometimes fall short of *eudaimonia* through disasters not of their own making." (Nussbaum 1996, para. 28). Her remarks on catharsis also emphasize the moral and didactic utility of tragedy: she suggests that the sense of the terms is such that tragedy "by removing obstacles to our recognition of the mutability of human life, 'cleans up' or 'clears up' our muddled view of human fortunes." (ibid.) A. Kosman takes a similar view, stating outright that the *Poetics* should be viewed as a "sequel" to the *Ethics* and *Politics* (Kosman 1992, 68).

it is only in terms of essence that further investigation can reliably be carried forward to yield knowledge rather than opinion.

The *Poetics* is thus not an exercise in literary criticism or connoisseurship; it is a systematic investigation aimed at building a rational account of tragedy as a self-subsistent species of representative art. Aristotle constructs his theory not primarily on empirical evaluation of particular tragedies, but on consideration of tragedy in general guided by his broader ontological, logical, and scientific framework. Accordingly, the central concern of the treatise will be to determine and explain in what respect a tragedy is a unified and coherent whole. In this way, knowledge of tragedy can be firmly grounded as science.

This reading of the *Poetics* can be supported by appeal to two connected aspects of Aristotle's broader ontological system. The first is Aristotle's division of necessity. In his natural and biological science, he distinguishes two kinds of necessity. According to *relative necessity*, an effect can be viewed as necessary relative to an unobstructed cause; according to *hypothetical necessity*, a cause can be necessary if a certain effect is to come about. His account of plot coherence in *Poetics* 7 appeals only to relative necessity, but a complete account will also require an appeal to hypothetical necessity.

Aristotle develops this division between kinds of necessity in order to clarify the explanatory priority among the four causes (material, efficient, formal, and final). The appeal to hypothetical necessity will rest on the distinction that Aristotle makes between events and the whole action of which they are parts, such that the events are like the material cause. According to the account in *Poetics* 7, each event is the

efficient cause of the next event, which is necessary relative to it. A complete account of tragic plot will require an account based on hypothetical necessity. In this way, the whole action, as the formal and final cause, can be shown to have explanatory priority over the events, which are the parts from which it is composed, and the wholeness of the plot is secured in a way that is not possible with just the appeal to relative necessity. This account, moreover, will explain how the specifically tragic effects of pity and fear by means of reversal and recognition can be reconciled with the generic requirement of continuity of action.

The gradual refinement of the conception of plot by appeal to a more nuanced account of necessity reveals an overall progression in the account, which reaches its completion in *Poetics* 18. Most modern scholars assume that in this chapter Aristotle is still dealing with plot, and that with the introduction of *desis* and *lusis* (complication and resolution), he is taking it up again according to a new set of terms. I will suggest that this is instead the synthesis he has been working towards: the discussion has returned from plot alone to tragedy as a whole, but now informed by the knowledge of tragedy as the form of mimesis that is defined by having a coherent plot that involves pity and fear, followed by catharsis. The new terms are thus not intended as an alternative way of characterizing plot, but as a way of accounting for how plot as the essential element is manifested in actual tragedies.

0.2 Outline

This thesis will be divided into three chapters. The first chapter will be a summary and explanation of the first six chapters of the *Poetics*. This will serve a twofold purpose. First, by showing the steps Aristotle takes to demonstrate the central

importance of plot to the discussion of tragedy, it will orient the succeeding chapters to the central issue of plot as the representation of an action. Secondly, it will serve to demonstrate that Aristotle's method in the *Poetics* is scientific. He does not aim just at critical and appreciative insight into tragedy as an art form; rather, he systematically employs principles that are derived from broader ontological and methodological reflections in order to establish scientific knowledge of tragedy as a distinct species of mimesis. With plot established as the defining element of tragedy, the systematic investigation of tragedy will be founded on an understanding of what plot is. Since the initial approach has been according to established methodological principles, it will then be possible to appeal again to broader principles to examine his theory of plot.

In the second chapter, I will examine the role of relative necessity in Aristotle's general account of plot. In *Poetics* 7, he describes a whole dramatic action as a sequence of events that are joined together by links of probable or necessary causation so as to form a continuous chain of action. In this way, he intends to establish that the plot of a tragedy is a unified whole. He thus appeals to relative necessity, whereby an effect is necessitated given its proper cause. Aristotle develops this in his works on natural science, and in the *Poetics* he justifies the appeal by comparing a drama to other kinds of whole entities. I will then argue that this account fails on two counts. First, it fails to explain how a dramatic action can have a beginning and end that are not extrinsically determined. Secondly, it results in a paradoxical account of tragedy: the specifically tragic effects of pity and fear depend

on a complex plot that includes an unexpected reversal, which seems irreconcilable with the general account of plot coherence.

In the third chapter, I will argue that the paradox can be resolved by appeal to Aristotle's more subtle notion of hypothetical necessity in accounting for the wholeness of complex structures made up of parts, especially living organisms. According to this, the parts of a whole should be viewed not as the efficient cause of the whole, but as the necessary substratum of the whole. In this way the unified whole has explanatory priority over its parts. By applying this principle to Aristotle's account of dramatic action, it will be possible to justify his claim that the represented action has a beginning and an end that are not arbitrarily imposed upon a broader continuum of action, but are intrinsic to the action that a play represents. Such an account will also show how the specifically tragic effects of fear and pity are brought about by the way in which the represented action is structured.

As a result of this interpretation, it is possible to read the *Poetics* as more continuous than many commentators have been able to discern. The account of plot coherence in *Poetics* 7 to 9 is a merely generic account of what is the case for drama in general; the discussion thereafter is an account of how this genus is realized specifically in tragedy. The *Poetics* thus exhibits a systematic progression: Aristotle begins with analysis of general principles and observed facts, to arrive at a preliminary definition of tragedy as representation of an action, then provides a general account of the dramatic action, followed by its differentiation as tragic action. With the essential account complete, the introduction in *Poetics* 18 of the ideas of complication and resolution can be seen as the culmination of the discussion.

Aristotle is not reopening the question of plot, but has instead reached a synthesis: the new set of terms apply to tragedy as a whole, the account of which is now founded on systematic knowledge of tragedy's essential nature as the representation of a whole action.

1. The Systematic Approach to Plot

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I will make an overview of the initial approach to tragedy in the first six chapters of the *Poetics*. I will follow as much as possible Aristotle's own order of presentation, and will attempt to explicate the conceptual links from section to section. By bringing forward the assumptions behind these links, I will try to establish that it is at least plausible, in spite of some textual corruption and parenthetical remarks, to read the *Poetics* as a systematic investigation of tragedy as a distinct species.

Aristotle investigates tragedy according to the same method that he recommends for scientific inquiry in general. He first canvasses received opinion about tragedy and about mimesis, the genus to which tragedy belongs. He then subjects tragedy as initially conceived to an analysis into its constituent elements, and from this determines which element is the defining one. Finally, he proposes a conception of tragedy that is based not on immediate impressions or unexamined opinions, but on an understanding of what distinguishes it from other species of mimesis: it is the representation of a single whole action. Such a conception thus qualifies as at least a starting point for systematic investigation aimed at reasoned knowledge, or science, of tragedy. Aristotle's account of tragedy and in particular his theory of plot, can therefore be elucidated by appeal to his broader ontological theory of knowable substances.

1.1 Narrowing the scope of the investigation

Aristotle begins with a highly compressed summary of his project, which situates the investigation within the genus of mimesis:

> To discuss the art of poetry in general, as well as the potential of each of its types; to explain the unity of plot required for successful poetic composition; also to analyze the number and nature of the component parts of poetry; and to deal similarly with the other questions which belong to this same method of enquiry – these are my proposed topics, beginning in the natural way from first things.[8]

He first states the range of his intended inquiry, and then what this inquiry will involve. The "art of poetry (*poietikes*)" embraces all the specific genres of mimesis with which Aristotle is concerned, of which the whole of the treatise will give an account, beginning with tragedy and epic in the surviving text, and presumably continuing with comedy in the lost second book. The defining and unifying feature of all these forms of poetry (as will be explained in what follows) is story or plot (*muthos*). *Muthos* is one of the "component parts" (*morion*) of poetry; it will therefore be necessary to enumerate these parts and to demonstrate why only plot is the defining one in the genres that Aristotle intends to investigate.

The starting point must be "from first things." Aristotle does not explain what he means by this, so the sense of it must be derived from what he does in fact take up first, which is a general survey of the various kinds of mimesis: "Epic and the production of tragedy, and comedy, and dithyrambic poetry and most of flute music and cithara music all are actually [forms of] mimesis on the whole."[9] This list is by no

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[8] *Poetics* 1.1447a8-13, tr. Halliwell 1987. I have modified Halliwell's translation, changing "first principles" to "first things." The Greek text reads simply "*apo ton proton*." To translate it as "principles" implies a systematic conception, which is still to be established. (I will use Halliwell's translation except as noted otherwise)

[9] 1.1447a13-16.

means complete, but is a presumably uncontroversial survey of the various forms that mimesis can take. By "first things," therefore, Aristotle seems to mean facts that are evident prior to analysis. The most prominent of these is that although the various forms of art differ from one another, they have in common that they are all forms of mimesis. Thus, there is a *prima facie* genus of mimesis that can be analyzed in order to come to a clearer understanding of what differentiates specific forms of mimesis from one another. Aristotle has already stated that he is concerned only with the kinds of mimesis that present a *muthos*; he will therefore need first to justify this focus with an explanation of how they are distinguished from other possible forms of mimesis.

1.1.1 The three mimetic modes

Forms of mimesis can be distinguished according to the media employed. Aristotle lists three: rhythm, language and melody, which can be used separately or mixed together.[10] Pipe and lyre music employ only melody and rhythm; dancing uses only rhythm, by means of which character, emotion, and action are represented; some forms of mimesis, such as elegy and epic, use only language; and some use rhythm, language, and meter, either in parts or separately. Tragedy and comedy are found in this last category: "There are some poetic arts which employ all the stated media (that is, rhythm, melody, and meter), such as dithyramb, nome, tragedy, and comedy."[11]

They can also be distinguished according to the object of mimesis. Aristotle, however, discusses only one kind of object, "people in action (*prattontas*)." Mimetic artists "can portray people better than ourselves, worse than ourselves, or on the same level." Forms of mimesis can thus be distinguished according to the sort of people

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[10] 1.1447a23.
[11] 1.1447b24-27.

represented: "It is evident that each of the stated types of mimesis will exhibit these differences, and will thus be distinguished according to the variations in the objects which it represents." This is how tragedy and comedy are distinguished: "The latter tends to represent men worse than present humanity, the former better."[12]

They can also be distinguished according to the style of mimesis. Again, he discusses only one mode, the different ways in which the same media can be employed:

> It is possible to use the same media to offer a mimesis of the same objects in any one of three ways: first, by alternation between narrative and dramatic impersonation (as in Homeric poetry); second, by employing the voice of narrative without variation; third, by a wholly dramatic presentation of the agents.[13]

Drama, according to this initial division, is entirely acted out, and this is what distinguishes it from other verbal forms of mimesis. Significantly for Aristotle's purposes, the discussion again comes to a conclusion with drama. He then discusses the term *drama* itself in relation to the term for people in action (*prattontes*). He explains it in terms of dialectical differences: the verbs *prattein* and *dran* are used in different dialects but both mean "to do." The etymology thus serves to underline Aristotle's main point: tragedy is the enactment of an action.[14]

1.1.2 A Systematic approach

By "first things," therefore, Aristotle seems to mean those things that are most obvious without systematic reflection. The method is thus to canvass what are evident facts about tragedy as one among several kinds of mimesis, and to sift through in

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[12] 2.1447b29-48a18.
[13] 3.1448a20-24.
[14] Aristotle's appeal to etymology implies that there is no firm distinction between the actors and the characters they are imitating, or between the action represented and the enactment of it: "It is because of this that some people derive the term *drama* from the enactive mimesis of agents (*drontas*)" (3.1448a28-29).

order to arrive at the true nature of mimesis and tragedy. The "first things" are the genus of mimesis and its member species. The task of the first three chapters of the *Poetics* has been to narrow the genus to identify what is specifically different about tragedy.

In this, Aristotle is working from the basic principles he enunciates for natural investigations generally. It is unlikely that what we learn from our own observation is entirely in error, nor that earlier investigations have been entirely wrong. This is not just an optimistic assumption on Aristotle's part: it is the very basis for any scientific investigation. Without some truth to be gained from direct observation, there is no way of advancing to theoretical knowledge: science starts from what is knowable by us and advances to what is knowable in itself. This is the operating principle of most of Aristotle's investigations: the investigation into a given genus or species does not inquire into the existence of the genus or species, but must assume its existence, and inquire into its essential features on the basis of observable phenomena.[15]

Aristotle begins by observing what are the evident characteristics of tragedy as a form of mimesis, and only then goes on to investigate the underlying causes of these. He enunciates in the *Parts of Animals* such a method:

> The best course appears to be that we should follow the method already mentioned, and begin with the phenomena presented by each group of animals, and, when this is done, proceed afterwards to state the causes of those phenomena, and to deal with their evolution.[16]

With a change of context from animals to forms of mimesis, this is a close description of the procedure in the *Poetics*. Aristotle undertakes the systematic investigation into what unites all forms of mimesis and what distinguishes them from one another. What

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[15] See *Posterior Analytics* 2.7 on assuming the existence of the genus under investigation.
[16] *Parts of Animals* 1.1.640a13-17. tr. William Ogle in McKeon 1941.

unites them is that they are all forms of mimesis; what distinguishes them is the way in which each is mimetic: "They differ from one another in three things: either in representing in different things, in representing different things, or in representing differently and not in the same way."[17] The result of the discussion is thus that mimesis occurs in three modes: the media, the object, and the style. The specific forms of mimesis can then be distinguished according to which mode or modes are employed, and which mode predominates.

The scope of the discussion of the three modes is geared to arriving at a preliminary characterization of tragedy. Aristotle's approach is by division within the genus of mimesis. Rather than take up all the possible permutations and combinations of the various mimetic media, objects, and modes, Aristotle mentions only those that will help to make a distinction between tragedy and other forms of mimesis. Tragedy uses all three media, rather than just one or two; it represents people in action who are better than average, rather than those who are worse or average; and it is fully enacted, not wholly or partially narrated. By differentiating forms of mimesis according to the analysis of mimetic modes, he proposes a preliminary definition of tragedy as the form of mimesis which is primarily done through language (rather than dance or music), and which is acted out (rather than narrated).[18]

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[17] 1.1447a16-18.

[18] Husain 2002 (18-29) gives an account of the identification of tragedy as a distinct *techne* (productive craft) by differentiation from the most general down to the most specific. In her account, the first differentia is between *techne* and *phusis*; then within *techne*, there is a division between artistic *techne* and useful *techne*. She asserts that *techne* in general is distinguished by mimesis, but that Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of mimesis. The first (mimesis-1), which defines *techne* in general, is structural mimesis, so that *techne* imitates the functions and processes of nature; the second (mimesis-2) is the differentia of artistic *techne*, and is the form of mimesis according to which works of art have representational content. Thus (in her view), the more general structural mimesis governs the representational mimesis of tragedy.

But this still is only a description of tragedy in relation to other forms of mimesis. Aristotle has identified tragedy as a distinct species by differentiation from other species of mimesis. It is not yet an account of what defines tragedy in itself. In the *Parts of Animals* 1.3, Aristotle discusses the limitations of the method of twofold division: one can identify a species by it, but the identification will fall short of scientific knowledge or account.[19] Aristotle has already promised at the beginning that the scientific account will have to do with unity of plot; but before getting to that, he will have to provide the second half of the initial discussion. The first half is an account of forms of mimesis; the second is of mimesis in general as an innate human faculty.

1.1.3 The developmental account of tragedy

In *Poetics* 4, Aristotle draws back from consideration of particular mimetic genres to consider mimesis in general:

> Poetry in general can be seen to owe its existence to two causes and these are rooted in nature. First, there is man's natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity (and this distinguishes man from other creatures, that he is thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis takes his first steps in understanding). Second, there is the pleasure which all men take in mimetic objects.[20]

Here again, Aristotle begins with the accepted understanding of concepts he is investigating. "Mimesis," in the sense in which it is employed in *Poetics* 1, seems to have a specialized sense, what we might call "artistic production;" here, however, he begins with what he takes as the most basic sense, as imitation. His grammar also indicates this: he avoids the noun *mimesis*, which denotes a process or activity, using instead the infinitive ("*to mimeisthai*"), by which he apparently means to indicate that

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[19] See also *Prior Analytics* 1.31.
[20] 4.1448b4-9.

he is not speaking of any technical sense of *mimesis* that he will develop, but only child-like mimicking. In this sense, mimesis is simply imitative reproduction of something that exists prior to and independent of the imitation.

Mimesis in the broadest sense is a natural human faculty, which forms the basis for the earliest learning in the development of a child. He adduces as proof the effect that more accurate imitations have: "We take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain."[21] Mimesis in this sense is simply the imitation and reproduction of something else; it is natural to humans because we are able to exercise reason and come to learn most basically in terms of representations.

Because mimesis in the most basic sense is representation of one thing as something else, it involves rational activity and is a way of learning. For this reason, it is pleasurable in itself, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant: "It is for this reason that men enjoy looking at images, because what happens is that as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element (identifying this as an image of such-and-such a man, for instance)."[22] This is a superior pleasure to the pleasure in a well-wrought object: "Since if he does not happen to have seen it before, it produces the pleasure not as a representation [*mimema*], but because of the workmanship or colour or because of some other such cause."[23] The pleasure taken in the product of art without regard to what is

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[21] 4.1448b10-11.
[22] 4. 1448b15-17.
[23] 4.1448b17-19. But note that Aristotle somewhat overstates his case here: one can still get the proper pleasure in a mimesis even if the particular object is unknown. He will need this qualification in *Poetics* 9 if he is to allow that the characters in a tragedy can be entirely made up rather than taken from history and myth. See section 2.1.4 below.

represented is still pleasure; it is just not the pleasure most appropriate to it as a *mimetic* and representative artifact. The pleasure taken in mimesis lies in the recognition that "this is that;" that is, it is pleasant because it involves reasoning.

The rest of *Poetics* 4 is taken up with a brief history of the development of tragedy as a distinct genre. The details of this are not so important theoretically, but the overall significance of this history is to trace a process of development to an identifiable outcome:

> Having come into being from an improvisational origin [...], tragedy was gradually enhanced as poets made progress with the potential which they could see in the genre. And when it had gone through many changes, tragedy stopped changing, since it had attained its nature.[24]

Tragedy is not, in Aristotle's view, a contingent outcome of a series of chance innovations; rather, it is the result of a series of discoveries leading to the full realization of a potential inherent in mimetic practice:

> Poetry was split into two types according to the poets' own characters: The more dignified made noble actions and noble agents the object of their mimesis; while lighter poets took the actions of base men and began by composing invectives, just as the other group produced hymns and encomia.[25]

Mimetic potential can be realized in practice because mimesis (as the genus embracing representative arts) involves a natural human faculty of imitation. Mimesis divides itself according to the particular natures of the people who produces mimetic objects. Tragedy thus developed historically through a series of particular

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[24] 4.1449a9-15. I have modified Halliwell's translation in the last sentence to emphasize the connection with natural science in Aristotle's vocabulary. Tragedy came to a stop (*epausato*) exactly because it had as a species attained its nature (*phusin*)

[25] 4.1448b24-27.

innovations, but its final form is the realization of a potential inherent in representation as a natural human practice.

Between the idea of mimesis as arising from a natural human faculty, and the account of the parts of mimesis, Aristotle has sketched out the key tension in his account of the nature of mimetic art. On the one hand, any mimetic object has a basic relation with an external reality. Mimesis is at the most basic level the imitation of something that exists in its own right. This is the reason why mimesis is a source of pleasure: it involves learning through reasoning of identities, which is natural human activity first expressed in child-like mimicking, and in the recognition that "this [representation of a man] is that [flesh-and-blood man]."[26] On the other hand, mimesis can be described according to a set of properties that are proper to it: Aristotle is investigating the ways in which mimetic products are constituted in a distinct activity of mimesis. This activity (and craft) has its own distinct properties: it has the three modes, for example, on which basis different genres can be distinguished, and the objects of imitation constitute only one of these modes.

1.2 The centrality of plot

Aristotle's initial approach to tragedy as a specific object of investigation is by division within the genus of mimesis. His initial definition is of tragedy as a subspecies of literary art, which he derives by analysis of observable and historical facts. Tragedy stands at the end of a process of literary development of a form of mimesis that uses language to represent people in action. The successive differentiation of various kinds within a single genus is one indication that Aristotle's approach to tragedy in the *Poetics* is systematic and according to his broader

[26] "*Houtos ekeinos*," 4.1448b17.

methodological principles. This differentiation is not the conclusion to the investigation, however, but only the preliminary identification of the species to be investigated. He has identified tragedy as a distinct species, which can then be investigated separately and in its own right. With a somewhat articulated sketch in place of tragedy as a "natural" phenomenon, and how it relates to other mimetic phenomena, Aristotle can now analyze tragedy according to the elements of which it is composed.

Aristotle has articulated an initial conception of tragedy according to how it is distinguished from other forms of mimesis by its use of the mimetic modes, and according to what mimesis is in general. By distinguishing tragedy as a distinct form of mimesis, he has laid the groundwork for the investigation into tragedy in its own right. The preliminary to this, however, will be the determination of a defining essence: "Let us deal with tragedy by taking up the scope of its essential nature which arises out of what has so far been said."[27] Aristotle began the treatise by asserting that the "essential nature (*ousia*)" of tragedy is plot, since the way in which a poetic composition succeeds or fails is in the composition of the plot; he is now in a position to explain why this is so, by showing that of all the elements that have been identified so far, only plot is essential.

1.2.1 The parts of tragedy

He begins by analyzing tragedy into its constituent elements, among which the definitive element must be found. The categories for such an analysis are already available from the initial division of the three mimetic modes: object, medium, and

[27] 6.1449b22-24. I have changed Halliwell's translation to render *horos* as "scope" rather than as "definition." Aristotle has limited the scope of the inquiry, and has yet to arrive at a scientific account (*logos*) of tragedy.

style. Aristotle used them at the beginning of the treatise to distinguish tragedy from other forms of mimesis, and thus to arrive at an initial concept of tragedy. Now he applies them to this concept in order to determine its essential nature. By dividing the elements within the single mimetic form of tragedy, he will have a division of constituent elements, among which will be the defining and unifying element.

As he did at the beginning of the treatise, he gives an anticipatory summary of his results in a new definition of tragedy:

> Tragedy then is a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude – in language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts – in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative – and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the catharsis of such emotions.[28]

Each element of this description is a summary of the discussion up to this point, with the exception of the last – pity, fear, and catharsis –, which is mentioned here for the first time. Aristotle is thus not entirely systematic: parts of the description arise from the initial discussion of mimesis and its historical development, and parts are still to be explained. Moreover, at this stage he is still describing tragedy in terms of its concrete existence, and has still to formulate a definition in terms of essential properties, without which a tragedy would not be a tragedy. With the articulated description (*horos*), he is now in a position to analyze tragedy into its elements, and to determine which are essential, and which are not, i.e. which are elements of the scientific account (*logos*) and which are not.

Aristotle summarizes with a list of the elements of tragedy distinguished according to the three mimetic modes of object, media, and style:

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[28] 6.1449b24-28.

> Tragedy as a whole must have six elements which make it what it is: they are story [*muthos*], character [*ethe*], diction [*lexis*], thought [*dianoia*], spectacle [*opsis*], lyric poetry [*melopoiia*]. Two of these are the media [i.e. diction and lyric], one the style [i.e. spectacle], and three the objects of mimesis [i.e. story, character, and thought] – and that embraces everything.[29]

Aristotle is thus building on what has been established so far, and extending it. The three mimetic modes were established through consideration of mimesis in general, and they now form the basis for the analysis of tragedy into its constituent parts.

1.2.2 Plot as the defining element

With tragedy derived as a species and as the distinctive subject matter of the investigation carried out in the *Poetics*, it remains to be determined which element of tragedy is the essential and defining one; or, more accurately (since Aristotle announced his conclusion at the very beginning), to explain why the defining element is plot.

Since Aristotle is primarily concerned with the objects of mimesis, the modes of media and style receive comparatively cursory (or at least isolated) treatment. Melody and spectacle are not defining features of tragedy. He concedes that spectacle is "emotionally powerful (*psukhagogikon*)," but its effect is not the effect that is proper to tragedy, and "the potential of tragedy does not depend upon public performance and actors."[30] Diction as well is not an essential element, although it may well be that it is always present. Part of the reason is that it is one of the ways in which the initial definition by division was reached: tragedy is, among other things,

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[29] 6.1450a7-12.

[30] 6.1450b16-19. Aristotle explains this further at the beginning of *Poetics* 14 (1453b1-11) with the observation that the proper effects of tragedy can be achieved even without a performance, as long as the plot is such as to produce pity and fear.

realized by means of "garnished language."[31] Moreover, since thought for Aristotle can only be represented in language, and deliberation is a sign of character, and character enters into action as part of the causal nexus of the action, language is always present. The discussion of diction in *Poetics* 20 to 22 appears after the central conclusions of the investigation have already been reached; although it contains some interesting observations about actual poetic practice and especially about metaphor, it seems quite peripheral to the treatise as a whole.[32]

The primary element of tragedy must be among the objects. Mimesis, in whatever more subtle sense that Aristotle will develop, must still be based on the more primitive sense of imitation and representation. Tragedy is a representation of some object, and without some object of mimesis, there can be no mimetic style or media.[33] One could perhaps liken the media to the material cause out of which a representation is made; likewise, the style would comprise all the contingent properties of the representation. This leaves only the objects as candidates for the formal cause. The three objects of mimesis that Aristotle has identified are action, character, and thought.

Given the way in which tragedy has been differentiated from other forms of mimesis, the one that naturally emerges as primary is action. The action is primary because all other elements serve it:

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[31] *Hedusmenoi logoi*, 6.1449b26.

[32] For the importance it has to the overall argument of the treatise the treatment of diction seems too long. Indeed, it reads as a freestanding discussion inserted only for the sake of completeness; it could just as well appear in the *Rhetoric*, in the third book of which there is a similar discussion of the effective use of language.

[33] For Aristotle, this is true for all forms of mimesis, even those that we might consider the most abstract and non-representative, such as music. Music, he says, is mimetic of character and emotion (*Poetics* 1.1447a27-28; see also *Politics* 8.7). See Halliwell 2002 ch. 8 for a thorough discussion.

> Since [tragedy] is a representation of an action, and is enacted by agents [*prattetai de upo tinon prattonton*], who must be characterized in both their character and their thought; for it is through these that we say that the actions are of a certain quality. There are by nature two causes of actions, namely character and thought, and it is according to these that all men have good fortune or bad.[34]

Character and thought are strictly subservient to action because they serve to characterize the action. Aristotle goes out of his way to emphasize the secondary status of character: "It is not therefore the function of the agents' actions to allow the portrayal of their characters; it is, rather, for the sake of their actions that characterization is included."[35] Whereas character and thought are represented in a play for the sake of the action, only the action is an end in itself: "The events and the plot are the goal (*telos*) of tragedy and the goal is what matters most of all."[36] He reiterates and strengthens his point further on: "The plot is the first principle and, so to speak, the soul (*hoion psukhe*) of tragedy."[37]

1.3 Essence and unity

Aristotle's underlying assumption in the conduct of his investigation is that it must first discover a defining essence of tragedy before it can be carried forward to render knowledge. Although tragedy may be by nature and evolution a conjunction of various elements, still there is only one essential element that is definitive of tragedy. He assumes that before tragedy can be investigated in its own right and according to its proper effects (namely, fear and pity and catharsis), he must first address how a

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[34] 6.1449b36-50a3 (my translation).
[35] 6.1450a20-22.
[36] 6.1450a22-23. Aristotle even declares that there could in principle be a tragedy without representation of character or thought, as long as it represents an action (6.1450a23-25). His own remarks elsewhere, however, suggest that a tragedy without character is in practice impossible. Since he has already defined tragedy as a mimesis of people in action, they must be of one kind or another: "Since the actors act out people in action, the latter are necessarily noble or base."(2.1448a1-2)
[37] 6.1450a36-37.

tragedy is a unified and whole entity. This is not simply a matter of common sense: it is a consequence of Aristotle's overall approach to systematic investigation. The starting point of any scientific investigation must be the definition of a distinct species. This definition must pick out the essential properties of the species, without which instances would fail to be members of the species.

1.3.1 Plot as the essential element

Aristotle remarks that plot is the principle and like the soul of tragedy. This is more than an illustrative analogy; it indicates the central importance of the plot to his discussion. It is the formal cause and *telos* of tragedy (and drama generally) and is what causes a play to be a unified substance. Since the action that is represented is the defining element, reasoned knowledge of tragedy must be founded on a grasp of plot as its essential element.

Although Aristotle first identifies tragedy as a distinct kind of mimesis in terms of the way in which language is used (whether the mimesis is narrated or acted out), this finally falls away in the discovery of the scientific definition. Tragedy did go through an historical process of development resulting in a particular mode of enacted representation in language and the use of particular meters; but once the essence of tragedy has been found to be representation of a single action, all the other elements turn out to be extraneous to the scientific definition.

As Aristotle proceeds, he in fact implicitly discards as inessential some of the features by which he first identified tragedy as the object of investigation. Notably, he identified tragedy as a species of mimesis that uses language (as opposed to music or dance); and within that sub-genus, tragedy uses language not in the form of partial or

entire narration (as epic does), but in the form of acting out of characters. Although tragedy developed historically as a form of mimesis that uses language, this is not a defining property of tragedy; only plot, the representation of an action, is essential, and all other elements are for the sake of it.[38]

1.3.2 The definition of the essence

This is in keeping with his methodological observations on science. The preliminary to science (or reasoned knowledge) is identification of a species to investigate. A species can be identified by means of induction or division, but the existence of the species to be studied is not part of the investigation. The concrete species found by division is not a conclusion, but only a starting point.[39] The statement at the beginning of *Poetics* 6 of the scope of tragedy, which includes the means of representation in garnished language, is still not yet a scientific definition.

The definition must instead be a statement only of the essence. By the end of *Poetics* 6, Aristotle has determined that the essence of tragedy is representation of an action. It is the *telos* of tragedy, in virtue of which a tragedy is a whole and for the sake of which all other parts are present. Most entities are complex and made up of parts: there must therefore be some factor in virtue of which they are not a mere collection of parts, but a unified whole. One can say in general that this unifying

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[38] Husain 2002 emphasizes the ways in which Aristotle employs his ontology in developing his account of tragedy, but does not fully appreciate that he is also employing a scientific method. She treats the differentiation in the first chapters of the treatise as an ontological conclusion; it is rather the preliminary to scientific investigation of the essence. She locates tragedy as a form of verbal mimesis (Husain 2002, 29). Language, however, is not a defining property of tragedy, but only a necessary property, as one of the mimetic media by means of which it is possible to distinguish tragedy from other forms of mimesis. Moreover, her placement of tragedy within a scheme of entities as a subdivision of literary art is not even a truly dichotomous division, in which each differentia is proper to the last. Representation of an action is not a proper differentia of verbal art: an action could just as well be represented in a mime, a wordless comic book, or a silent film.

[39] See *Posterior Analytics* 2.5.

factor is the form, in virtue of which the matter makes up the whole composite substance. A defining essence is also the basis for any systematic knowledge of particular substances. One can have direct sensory experience of particulars and their properties, but without apprehension of the specific form, there is no scientific and rationally founded knowledge of them.

This is closely connected with his epistemology: if something fails to be unified and articulated, it lacks limits and so is not properly an object of knowledge. One of the central arguments for wholeness and oneness of entities is that they must possess these qualities if they are to be objects of knowledge; moreover, entities are unified in virtue of a defining essence, which exhibits the necessity required of knowledge. If the essence were not unified, the substance would be *aoristos*, that is, undefined, and therefore unknowable.[40]

1.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to show that Aristotle's investigation of tragedy is conducted systematically and is rooted in his broader ontological and scientific framework. The survey of forms of mimesis and the inquiry into mimesis in general are not merely commonsensical preliminaries, but are in keeping with Aristotle's broader methodological principle of beginning with what is more evident to us in order to arrive at what is more evident in itself. This science-oriented approach is continued in the identification by division of tragedy as a distinct species. The conclusion of this division, however, is not yet a definition (*logos*), but only a statement of the scope of tragedy in its concrete existence as possessing various parts

[40] See Modrak 2001 for an extended discussion of this issue.

and qualities. The definition of tragedy is stated only after the further step of analyzing tragedy as Aristotle finds it in order to arrive at a statement of its essence.[41]

This is consistent with Aristotle's general conception of science. Each particular science investigates its proper objects as entities that belong to a species. If the defining element of the species can be determined, a scientific explanation can be formulated of why a particular instance of that species is the way it is. Without a grasp of the specific essence, there can be no scientific knowledge (*episteme*). The essential and defining element of tragedy is plot, or the representation of an action. With the plot determined as the essential element of tragedy, the next step in the inquiry should be the investigation into the nature of that element.

[41] The overview in Husain 2002 of how the *Poetics* should be read in terms of the ontology of definable species and unified entities is useful in showing that the account of tragedy is made in terms of a broader philosophical system. Husain does not appreciate, however, that the identification by division of tragedy as a distinct species of mimesis constitutes only the preliminary to a definition of the essence of tragedy.

2. Relative Necessity and the Material Cause

2.0 Introduction

In the first chapter, I showed that Aristotle argues for the centrality of plot in terms of his broader theory of knowable substances. In this chapter, I will show how his ontology continues to play a role in the analysis of dramatic action. As the defining element of tragedy, the plot must be a unified essence, and the elements of the definition must be necessary elements of a unity. But also, because a tragedy is essentially a representation, its wholeness will depend on the wholeness of what it represents, i.e. the underlying action.

The criterion of wholeness is thus complicated in the *Poetics* by the mimetic character of tragedy. Aristotle must explain how the underlying action is a coherent whole in its own right. The account in *Poetics* 7 of the underlying tragic action is deceptively simple, and on a cursory reading seems to be mere common sense. However, the terms of the discussion are not exclusive to the study of drama, nor just inherited from ancient literary criticism, but are derived from the larger system of Aristotelian science. In particular, the discussion of action in terms of size and parts is sustained by an analogy with animals, which reveals a basis for Aristotle's account of tragedy in his broader ontological system.

I will first show how the terms in which Aristotle lays out his account of dramatic action in *Poetics* 7 are determined by his broader theory of wholeness and coherence. For an entity to have a distinct existence it must be a whole within certain limits. Moreover, boundedness is also a precondition for something to be an object of knowledge at all. Every entity that has parts must therefore have some principle in

virtue of which its parts are necessarily joined together to form a whole. The connection in *Poetics* 7 with these general doctrines is brought out by the analogy he draws with physical bodies.

I will then examine how these ontological underpinnings are played out in the explanation of how a represented action can be a coherent whole in its own right. Aristotle analyzes the action into a complex whole made up of a series of events, and appeals to necessity and probability as the unifying factor in virtue of which the parts cohere as a whole. The events are unified not by being all contained within a single play, but by being necessarily related to each other; the action is thus a whole in its own right. The appeal is grounded in his natural science and in particular in the notion of relative necessity.

Finally, I will argue that this account is not sufficient to establish unity of the action. It gives some explanation of coherence, but because it fails to establish intrinsic limits to the action, it cannot account for wholeness; this failure is a direct result of the mimetic character of tragedy. Moreover, it provides no way of understanding how the specifically tragic effects of fear, pity, and catharsis can be reconciled with unity of action.

2.1 *Muthos* and *praxis*

Aristotle has already determined that the essential element of tragedy is plot, which is a translation of the word *muthos*. As Aristotle defines it in the *Poetics*, the plot is the representation of an action (*mimesis praxeos*). Since the object of mimesis is the defining element of drama, the investigation must proceed to an analysis and definition of the action.

Muthos is a normal word in classical Greek. Aristotle first uses the term in a more general sense to mean simply "story," and gradually develops a more technical usage of the term. Beginning with the everyday sense of *muthos* as story, Aristotle considers what properties the *muthos* of a dramatic mimesis must possess for it to be considered the essential characteristic of a tragedy. Since a tragedy is a unified whole, the *muthos* cannot be just any story, but only one that can serve as the unifying element of a tragedy. Moreover, since the plot is a representation, its object, the action, can be said to exist independently of being represented. This follows from the basic conception from *Poetics* 4 of mimesis, as the imitation of things that are prior to the imitation. Therefore, insofar as the action is the object of representation, and so ontologically independent of the representation, it must have its own intrinsic unity.

2.1.1 Unity of the action

As he did in deriving the essential nature of tragedy as plot, Aristotle explains what an action is according to methods and criteria derived from his wider scientific system. In general, if something is a substance it must be a unified whole. Aristotle underwrites this by appeal to its knowability: if something is not a unified whole, it is unbounded and undefined (*aoristos*), and so fails to be an object of knowledge; and if it cannot be known, it is not a substance. If the action represented in a tragedy is not a coherent whole, it is not fully amenable to rational apprehension, and so cannot be a source of the sort of pleasure that Aristotle attributes to mimesis in general, in the reasoning that "this is that."

His theoretical starting point is the close association between being and unity. It is a basic attribute of entities to be whole; if something is not a unified whole, it

falls short of being fully an entity. This is a fundamental theme that runs throughout Aristotle's philosophy and science.[42] He discusses it at length in the *Metaphysics*, particularly in book 7, where he discusses composite substances, and in book 9, where he takes up potentiality and actuality. In the philosophical dictionary in *Metaphysics* 5 he gives a basic definition of "whole:" "'A whole' means (1) that from which is absent none of the parts of which it is said to be naturally a whole, and (2) that which so contains the things it contains such that they form a unity."[43] In order for something to be whole then, it must be *complete*, that is, it must lack no parts; and it must be *coherent*, that is, the parts of which it is composed must be related among themselves such that they form a unity.

Since a tragedy is something that can be rationally apprehended as a whole, it must have a unifying element in virtue of which it is a whole entity. Drama is primarily the representation of an action (*mimesis tes praxeos*), and that representation is called the plot (*muthos*). Plot is the defining end (*telos*) of tragedy; a tragedy is therefore a coherent whole in virtue of the plot.

Furthermore, since tragedy is a form of mimesis, its wholeness is derived from the wholeness of what it represents. Since the mimesis is whole in virtue of the plot, and the plot is a representation of an action, the action in turn must be a whole in its own right. This follows from Aristotle's general account of mimesis in *Poetics* 4. A representation is whole in virtue of the object it represents; likewise, if the action that

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[42] What makes something a whole is a central question not only for Aristotle, but for Greek philosophy generally, beginning with Parmenides. My discussion of wholeness as a metaphysical question is necessarily extremely cursory, delving only as deep as is required to show how it informs the *Poetics*.
[43] *Metaphysics* 5.26.1023b26-28.

a tragedy represents is not a coherent whole, the tragedy in turn, as the representation of the action, will fail to be a coherent whole.

In defining the species of tragedy, Aristotle defined plot as a unified sequence of events that involve fear and pity and the catharsis of such emotions. In accounting for individual plays, Aristotle gives examples of how the action itself is a unified whole. He exemplifies this in the syntax of his plot synopsis of Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Tauris* in *Poetics* 17.[44] Instead of reciting a simple sequence of events, he reduces most of the events to subordinates clauses, with only four main verbs. The first (Iphigeneia taking the priesthood) is only background, the second (Orestes' arrival) is the start of the action, the third is the recognition, and the last is simply the outcome: "From there was salvation (*kai enteuthen he soteria*)." Aristotle's intention seems to be to downplay the sequence of all the events and to emphasize the central transition from an initial state to a crisis to an outcome.[45]

Having established in *Poetics* 6 that the defining element of tragedy is plot, or the representation of an action, Aristotle's next task in accounting for tragedy is to show how the action is constituted and how it in turn is a coherent whole of the kind he has in mind in his observations on composition in *Poetics* 17.

2.1.2 Analogy with animals

With his explicit comparison in *Poetics* 7 of the dramatic action to a living organism, Aristotle makes clear the relevance of the natural sciences to his account of tragedy. First of all, he gives a general account of what an action should be like: "It has already been laid down that tragedy is the representation of an action that is

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[44] 17.1455b3-12.

[45] He similarly exploits the possibilities of Greek syntax in his tightly unified first definition of tragedy in *Poetics* 6.1449b36-50a10. See Lowe 2000, 7 for an analysis.

complete and whole, having a certain size."[46] He then clarifies that having size is not always a property of a whole: "For there can also be a whole that has no size."[47] The analogy of plot with living animals is explicit: "Any beautiful object, whether a living creature or any other structure of parts, must possess not only ordered arrangement but also an appropriate scale (for beauty is grounded in both size and order)."[48] A dramatic action is a whole that has a certain size; as a whole entity it can also possess beauty, and this is at least in part a matter of having an appropriate size.

Aristotle first explains what he means by appropriate size. He observes that an animal must not be too small to be judged beautiful, nor too large: "A creature could not be beautiful if it is either too small – for perception of it is practically instantaneous and so cannot be experienced – or too great, for contemplation of it cannot be a single experience."[49] That is, for an entity to be beautiful, it must be large enough to be perceived, but small enough that it is perceived all together. Aristotle then extends this to dramatic action by analogy: "Just, therefore, as a beautiful body or creature must have some size, but one which allows it to be perceived all together, so plots should be of a length which can easily be held in the memory."[50] Thus, standards of coherence of a dramatic action have been established as structurally analogous as those of living entities.[51]

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[46] 7.1450b23-25.
[47] 7.1450b25-26.
[48] 7.1450b34-37. The word translated as "living creature" is *zoon*, which could also mean statue. This would not, however, affect the analogy here: the central point is that the action is made up of parts in a way analogous to the way a physical body is made up of parts. For a body to be a coherent whole, its parts must be organized in a certain way in relation to one another.
[49] 7.1450b51a1.
[50] 7.1451a3-6.
[51] They are not, however identical: as Else notes, the explanation of plots by analogy with animals "involves a change of medium from sight to sound and from space to time." (Else 1957, 285). There is

Aristotle then explains how these criteria are played out when transferred from bodies to dramatic actions. The length of the action is determined by how long is required to present a complete action that can be grasped as a whole: "The limit which accords with the true nature of the matter is this: beauty of size favours as large a structure as possible, provided that coherence is maintained."[52] Dramatic art demands an action of a length that is not determined by extrinsic factors, such as the conditions of performance. Rather, the length must be such as to make an action that is complete according to the definition of the art: "A concise definition is to say that the sufficient length of a poem's scale is the scope required for a probable or necessary succession of events which produce a transformation either from affliction to prosperity, or the reverse."[53] Just as a living creature is whole according to its internal structuring of its parts, so a tragic action is bounded in virtue of its intrinsic structure.

Aristotle has thus drawn together the two aspects of dramatic action so that the unity of the action is explained in terms of what he has defined as the goal of tragedy. The action must be a coherent series of events that includes a reversal, and the length of the action is as much as is required to represent a transformation. In identifying a criterion for the correct length of the action, Aristotle also states a basic structural requirement of a tragic action: that it be centred on a reversal (though at this point, Aristotle has yet to explain what a dramatic reversal is). The limits of a tragic

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also a change of vocabulary. A beautiful physical body should be *eusunopton* (viewable all together), whereas a fine action should be *eumnemoneuton* (able to held all together in memory).

[52] 7.1451a9-11.

[53] 7.1451a11-15.

action thus are not determined extrinsically by the limits of a performance, but intrinsically by the internal structure of the action.

2.1.3 Wholeness of the action

Aristotle has derived the central importance of plot as the representation of an action from reflection on what mimesis is in general. In *Poetics* 4, he grounds artistic mimesis in simple child-like imitation of objects that exist independently of being imitated. The definition of artistic mimesis (specifically, tragic drama) must therefore be in some way compatible with the simple form of mimetic imitation. The link is made through the definition of the action as a complex whole composed of a series of acts or events (*pragmata*). Each dramatic *pragma* is thus like a single act of imitation. The action is not, however, just any series of events: since the object of a single mimesis must itself be a single whole, the events must be unified in such a way that they form a coherent whole, of which the plot is the representation.

The analogy with animals provides the grounding for the way in which Aristotle analyzes the dramatic action. As an animal is made up of various parts that are composed in an arrangement that constitutes the animal, so the action can be analyzed into constituent parts that are united in an arrangement that is the action. He reiterated this several times in mentioning the action as the "composition of the events (*sustasis/sunthesis ton pragmaton*)."[54]

Even if allowance is made for episodic digressions, a single mimesis (a drama or epic) presents one central story, which is the representation of an action. Although the action is a unified whole, it is also extended temporally, analogously to the way a

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[54] 6.1450a4-5 (*ten sunthesin ton pragmaton*), 15 (*he ton pragmaton sustasis*), 30 (*muthon kai sustasin pragmaton*), 7,1450b22 (*ten sustasin ... ton pragmaton*).

body has size and is extended spatially; it can thus be divided into parts. The action is the "organization of the events:" it is a complex whole made up of parts. The parts must come together in a way that is not by chance; otherwise there is no whole, but only a heap. The parts must therefore be joined together in some necessary fashion.

The unity cannot be contingent or by chance, such as if the action is one because it is all represented in one tragedy; rather, it must be both intrinsic and necessary. That is, the unity of the action must arise from its internal structure, and the parts of the action must be related by more than mere juxtaposition.

A drama is fundamentally the acting out of a single action (*praxis*), which itself is a unified whole. The action is not a simple whole but complex: it is the composition of the events. Since the action has size it must be made up of parts, and since its extension is temporal these parts must be a series of acts or events. Since the action can be analyzed in this way, Aristotle must show in what respect the events are unified as an action: "Given these definitions, my next topic is to prescribe the form which the structure of events ought to take, since this is the first and foremost component of tragedy."[55] Without some organizing principle in the events, the action will fail to be unified; and if the action is not unified, the representation is not properly unified.

Aristotle begins his answer with a general characterization of beginning, middle, and end:

> By 'whole' I mean possessing a beginning, middle, and end. By 'beginning' I mean that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event but which can itself give rise naturally to some further fact or occurrence. An 'end' by contrast, is something which naturally occurs after a preceding event, whether by necessity or as a

[55] 7.1450b21-23.

> general rule, but need not be followed by anything else. The 'middle' involves causal connections with both what precedes and what ensues.[56]

In this passage, he gives an account both of coherence and completeness in a dramatic plot. He first draws out the implication of the action having a certain length: it can be divided into parts. Since an action is a complex whole, the simple elements must be something indivisible. This he proposes as the individual *pragma*, which can be translated as event, act, or state of affairs; the word is also etymologically connected with *praxis*, or action.

There must therefore be some unifying factor, so that the events represented on stage are not just a random sequence, but are all constituent parts of the whole action. Aristotle must show that the events are connected to one another in some way more robust than just happening one after another. As he remarks in *Poetics* 10, "it makes a great difference whether things happen because of one another, or only after one another."[57] In *Poetics* 7, he proposes a simple form of necessity, whereby each event is the natural effect of the preceding event; each event is the efficient cause of the next, which is its effect, resulting in a continuous chain of causation. This establishes the coherence of the action; Aristotle claims that completeness results from a closure of the causal chain: the first event of the chain is uncaused, and the last event causes nothing further.

2.1.4 Non-poetic stories

Aristotle clarifies in *Poetics* 8-9 what he means by unity of action by discussing forms of storytelling that are not unified in the way he lays down for

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[56] 7.1450b26-31.
[57] 10.1452a20-21.

tragedy. One way in which an action is not unified is in being made up of the acts of just one person. In real life, the most definite beginnings and endings are births and deaths, so that the clearest case in real life of a complete action is an individual's life story; and since drama represents people in action, this might seem a sufficient criterion of dramatic unity. However, Aristotle explicitly rules this out as a good criterion of unity of dramatic action:

> A plot does not possess unity (as some believe) by virtue of centring on an individual. For just as a particular thing may have many random properties, some of which do not combine to make a single entity, so a particular character may perform many actions which do not yield a single 'action'.[58]

That is, just because all acts are performed by or are centred on one person is not enough for those acts to be joined by the links of necessity that bring about a unified action. The limits of birth and death are not intrinsic to the events that make up an individual's life, and do not arise from the connections among the individual's acts; a story about one person is only incidentally whole and unified, but not intrinsically. Aristotle underlines the need for an intrinsic pattern of necessity in terms of the relation of the constituent events to the whole action:

> Its parts, consisting of the events, should be so constructed that the displacement or removal of any one of them will disturb and disjoint the work's wholeness. For anything whose presence or absence has no clear effect cannot be counted an integral part of the whole.[59]

No event can be added to an action that is whole, and if the action is whole, no event can be removed either.

He expands further on his definition of action by contrasting drama with history. Their difference does not lie in the fact that history represents real events, and

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[58] 8.1451a15-19 (with Halliwell's rendering of *muthos* changed from "plot-structure" to "plot.")
[59] 8.1451a32-35.

tragedy fictional events: tragedy can also deal with historical events, and Aristotle observes that the pleasure to be had from a tragedy is the same whether the characters and events are historical or invented.[60] The difference lies rather in the way in which the represented events are arranged. What distinguishes tragedy from history is that it presents not just a sequence of events, but a likely pattern of events; the poet's task is "to speak not of events which have occurred, but of the kind of events which could occur, and are possible by the standards of likelihood and necessity."[61] A tragedy could be composed entirely of real events, but if it is arranged into a pattern of likelihood it is not therefore just a history. In presenting a general pattern, tragedy presents a something more universal than does history, which presents only particulars. For this reason, "poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history."[62]

The counter-examples of history and biography serve to clarify what Aristotle has in mind for the unity he claims is characteristic of drama. A biographical work is unified as the representation of all the actions done by an individual; these actions are not, however, intrinsically connected to one another, but only extrinsically in all being done by one person. A biography thus might be complete, but will not be coherent. A work of history may be unified by representing a continuous chain of causality, of which all the events occur within a limited period of time; the beginning and end of the chain, however are arbitrarily imposed and do not arise from the action itself, and the chain of causation may extend beyond the limits of the history. Thus, a work of history may be a coherent series of events, but will not be complete. By

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[60] 9.1451b15-26.
[61] 9.1450a36-38.
[62] 9.1451b5-7.

contrast, a tragic action is whole because it is both coherent as a continuous chain of events, and complete in having intrinsic limits so that the representation excludes no elements that are part of the action.

2.2 Necessity

The events represented in a tragedy are unified by links of necessity and probability. No event stands alone, but each is causally linked to the preceding and following event, so that the action of a tragedy is not a random juxtaposition, but a logically connected series of events joined together by necessity and probability. The coherence of the play seems to be secured, and the rounding off of the chain at the beginning and end secures completeness.

Taken in isolation, the appeal to necessity and probability seems a reasonable claim based on common sense and observation: events generally have some cause and can be the cause of further events, and tragedy just imitates this feature of real human events. But the appeal to necessity and probability is not as straightforward as it seems: the assertions that Aristotle makes about how the events represented in a play cohere turn out to rest on a much more elaborate theoretical edifice than just reflection on tragedy.

2.2.1 Relative necessity

The description of plot coherence in *Poetics* 7 relies implicitly on Aristotle's broader conception of efficient causation and the relative necessity of an effect given an unimpeded cause. Each event is caused by the previous event, such that it follows from the first either necessarily or probably. That is, if the first event is taken as given, the second event either necessarily follows or is likely to follow. If all the

events that together make up the plot are linked this way, then the action will be coherent, and so in turn will be the plot.

The emphasis on the necessary connection of events in a play follows directly from the application of his theory of substance to the temporally extended entities of drama. The link between the theory of drama and the theory of substance is accomplished by means of relative necessity.

Aristotle's most basic definition of necessity is found in the philosophical lexicon in *Metaphysics* 5. He makes a basic division of the ways in which something can be called necessary:

> We call "necessary" (1) that without which as a condition a thing cannot live; e.g., breathing and food are necessary for an animal, for it is incapable of existing without these; [...] (2) the compulsory and compulsion, i.e. that which impedes and tends to hinder contrary to impulse and purpose. For the compulsory is called necessary [...] and compulsion is a form of necessity. [...] (3) We say that that which cannot be otherwise is necessarily as it is.[63]

Three forms of necessity are mentioned in this passage. The first is not at issue in the brief account in *Poetics* 7-9. Aristotle does not say that each event requires its preceding event: rather, that each event necessitates a further event. The third also is not at issue: Aristotle is discussing causation in the sublunary realm, and nothing in the sublunary realm is unqualifiedly necessary.

The relative necessity that Aristotle appeals to in *Poetics* 7 is related to efficient causation. Of Aristotle's four causes, the efficient cause is most like the modern conception of cause: it is "that which tells us 'whence comes the origin of a change'."[64] If a cause is present and there are no obstructing factors, it will function

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[63] *Metaphysics* 5.5.1015a20-34 (tr. Ross in McKeon 1941).
[64] Sorabji 1980, 40, citing *Physics* 2.3, 2.7, *Metaphysics* 5.2.

as the "origin of change:" it will bring about an effect which is necessary; not absolutely necessary, but relative to its cause. In the *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle distinguishes the relative necessity in the efficient cause from the hypothetical form of necessity in the final cause (which in natural science has explanatory priority):

> It is that which is yet to be—health, let us say, or a man—that, owing to its being of such and such characters, necessitates the pre-existence or previous production of this and that antecedent [by hypothetical necessity]; and not this or that antecedent which, because it exists or has been generated, makes it necessary that health or a man is in, or shall come into, existence [by relative necessity].[65]

The model of coherence in *Poetics* 7 is of each event as the efficient cause of the next event: the first event or state of affairs necessitates a subsequent event or state of affairs, in a temporal sequence.

2.2.2 Objections

It might be objected that the description of dramatic action as a necessary sequence of events goes too far. One objection is on purely literary and artistic grounds. If Aristotle is laying down that the action should comprise all the events represented, and that they all should be joined in a necessary sequence, he seems to be demanding an impossibly high level of causal coherence in the tragedy that would make for a play with an almost syllogistic logical structure.[66]

The representative character of drama seems to limit the applicability of Aristotle's appeal to necessity. Since the action is done by people, unqualified necessitation seems to be ruled out in the connection of events. As Aristotle says in

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[65] *Parts of Animals* 1.1.640a4-8. I discuss this distinction further in chapter 3.

[66] It is worth noting that already in the late antique commentators, the *Poetics* along with the *Rhetoric* was treated as one of the logical works. This led to an interest among the Arabic commentators in the idea of a "poetic syllogism," alongside the logical syllogism and the rhetorical syllogism (enthymeme). See Black 1990.

the *Rhetoric*, "All our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity."[67] But since human actions are mostly contingent, they should generally fail to exhibit the necessary causation that Aristotle needs in order to account for the coherence of a tragic plot.

If something really is an efficient cause, its effect will occur necessarily, but in the sublunary world the effect can be impeded by obstructing or impeding causes. Human actions not only are subject to interference from the complexity of causes that exist in the sublunary world, they are also subject to the internal conflict in the human soul among habit, rational choice, appetite, etc. Since tragedy is a representation of human actions, Aristotle puts in a concession to the contingency that is inherent in human action: he says that the events that make up an action are linked not by strict necessity, but by necessity and what happens for the most part.[68]

Nevertheless, this concession has little force within the theory that Aristotle develops in the *Poetics*. Drama represents human acts, which, because they are stoppable, are not entirely necessary; but in fact, there is no room in Aristotle's dramatic theory for impeded actions, or uncaused events such as coincidences. Such events do not fall within the framework of efficient causation he has described. A coincidence has no identifiable cause, and an impeded cause is contrary to what is likely and happens for the most part. They both fall beyond causal explanation, and so are unaccountable (*aloga*). As unaccountable elements, they are excluded from the highly rational structure that Aristotle prescribes for dramatic plot; they therefore

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[67] *Rhetoric* 1.2, 1357a27-28. tr. W. Rhys Roberts in McKeon 1941.
[68] *Hos epi to polu* (7.1450b30).

cannot serve as limits to the action, but would instead be signs of poor plot construction.

There are two ways in which probability can be correlated with necessity. In the first, probability is just necessity that can be stopped, i.e. the effect come about for the most part, unless there is a contingently occurring obstructing cause. In the second, probability is instead likelihood, so that what occurs is according to expectation. It is this latter sense that ultimately matters for Aristotle's theory. Since chance events are excluded from good plots, the concession expressed in "for the most part" has no bearing on Aristotle's theory of plot. It is therefore significant perhaps that Aristotle ceases to use the phrase "for the most part (*hos epi to polu*)" after the first mention of it, and replaces it with "what is likely/believable (*eikos*)."[69] Since chance events are excluded from good tragic plots, the problem remains of whether Aristotle's theory is even a reasonable description of how actual tragedies represent human actions with their inherent contingency.

Another objection to Aristotle theory might be that it fails to account for plays that are thought to be tragedies, but do not have the sort of unified plot he prescribes. Despite his stringent prescriptions for the necessary connections from event to event, Aristotle does allow that a tragedy with an episodic plot still is a tragedy; it just is not a very good one.[70] In a sense, Aristotle's definition of plot is not fully generalized to cover all cases; instead, it is a definition of the best sort of plot. This, however, is an integral part of Aristotle's account of specific essence in terms of potentiality and actuality. The general definition of a species is derived from the most completely

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[69] 7.1451a12-13. For the significance of the replacement of *hos epi to polu* with *eikos*, see Frede 1992.
[70] 9.1451b33-52a1.

actualized instances; the nature defined serves not just as the formal cause prior to and determinative of the instance, but also as the final cause, towards which the instances tend collectively, even if some or all instances do not fully actualize it. That is, although his method is to begin by canvassing received knowledge about the object of investigation, the definitions towards which he aims are always somewhat a priori, in that they are of the perfect species form, even if no particular instance fully embodies it.[71] In this way, Aristotle makes it possible to speak of tragedies that do not fully conform to his definition, but which are nevertheless tragedies. This is because they still partially conform to the fully actual form of tragedy, and are explained in terms of that form; even if they lack the sort of plot that Aristotle prescribes, they are to be evaluated as tragedies that fail to achieve that form fully.

2.3 Limitations of the model

I will conclude this chapter by arguing that the explanation of plot coherence that Aristotle offers in *Poetics* 7 fails to account for how a plot can be an intrinsic whole. Ironically, this is directly because of the mimetic properties of the *pragmata*. Aristotle relies on their structural similarity to real-life events to establish coherence, but by the same token, this similarity defeats his attempt to establish that the action is intrinsically limited and thus complete.

2.3.1 *Mimesis* and *poiesis*

In his initial description of the action as a necessary sequence of events, Aristotle is actually claiming to account for two properties of plot at once. When he

[71] The same procedure can be seen in Aristotle's definition in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1 of *eudaimonia* as the activity of a fully virtuous person. Perhaps no one could in practice achieve this, but the definition is not thereby rendered invalid. Such a paragon would simply provide the standard against which to measure incomplete *eudaimonia*.

claims that each event is one link in a continuous causal chain, he gives an account of how the action is coherent; when he says that the sequence has a beginning and an end, he gives an account of how it is complete. Plot, as the representation of a whole action, must not only have its own internal coherence, but also have its own intrinsic limits. The beginning and end should not be determined externally or arbitrarily (as in history writing), but should arise from the action itself. The notion of the *sustasis ton pragmaton* also unites the two aspects of drama as representation and as composition. The play is made up of a series of events (which are mimetic in the more primitive sense of being imitative of human acts), but representation of events is not enough to make a play: the play must present a single whole action that is coherent and complete.

The events represented do not naturally come already as integral parts of a whole action. Instead the structure (*sustasis*) of the events is something introduced by the poet: they are composed, and from that composition (*sunthesis*) results the dramatic action. Thus, the fully dramatic mimesis is not mere reproduction, but is also making something that does not pre-exist the mimesis. The dramatic action is the object of representation, but its wholeness is not simply present in an action that exists independently of being represented and which the playwright reproduces on stage. Rather, the work of the playwright is to select the events and arrange them into a whole action. This provides some justification for Aristotle's occasionally loose distinction between plot and action. Since the action is coherent because of the compositional action of the playwright, it turns out not to be prior to and separable from its representation. Although he defines plot as the representation of the action,

he also refers at one point to plot as the composition of the events, which was his definition of the action.[72] This is not just a slip of the pen: because the plot is just the representation of the action, and the wholeness of the action is a result of the playwright's craft, the plot as representation has the same structure as the action that is the object of mimesis.

Representation and creation thus come together; the dramatic poet engages simultaneously in imitative reproduction (*mimesis*) and production (*poiesis*). Tragedy can be studied both as a craft with its proper efficient principles that come from the poet, and as a species with its own quasi-natural principles inherent in tragedies. Aristotle thus has moved towards a sense of mimesis that is dependent on the primitive sense of imitation and reproduction, but that is also production of the object represented.[73]

2.3.2 Intrinsic limits and completeness

A dramatic mimesis presents an action that is whole in virtue of being coherent and complete. Coherence is attained by the operation of relative necessity: each event is the necessary or probable effect of the preceding event. Of completeness, on the other hand, the account is not, on closer inspection, satisfactory. Not only is each event the effect of the preceding event, but also each event in turn causes the next event. If each event is both an effect and a cause, there will be a continuous chain of causation without beginning or end; and thus any mimesis would have to impose arbitrarily a starting point and an ending point to the action. But, as I have argued, this would leave the action incomplete: unless the limits are intrinsic to

[72] 6.1450a4-5.
[73] I will return to this point in chapter 3.

the whole action, some of its parts may be excluded if the beginning and end are imposed arbitrarily on the representation.

Aristotle offers a simple account of what makes for an intrinsic beginning and end by positing that events come in three kinds: those that come in the middle, those that come at the beginning, and those that come at the end. The distinctions among them are arrived at by a kind of conceptual subtraction from the middle events. An event in the middle is both a cause and effect; the beginning, on the other hand, is only a cause and is not itself caused by anything previous, and the end is only an effect, and does not cause any further event.

This amounts, however, only to a description of what would be the case if a mimesis were both coherent and complete only according to relative necessity, but it violates the very mimetic character of drama. But the mimetic character is what made possible in the first place the appeal to relative necessity. A dramatic mimesis is made up of a temporal series of represented events (*pragmata*). As in real life, every cause has some effect, and every effect is the effect of some cause. The world of human action is part of this nexus of causality: so, for example, a choice that someone makes is the outcome of rational deliberation as well as the effect of his particular character (whether he is temperate, intemperate, self-controlled, etc.). Since tragedy, as Aristotle has already established, is essentially the representation of an action, and this action is done by people in action (*prattontes*), each individual action is the effect of some human cause, which subsumes both character and thought.

However, this chain of causation has no beginning and end, except the birth and death of the person doing the action. Aristotle has already ruled out focus on one

person as an adequate criterion of unity; instead, the beginning and end of the action must be somehow intrinsic to the action, and this is what should allow him to say that the beginning is uncaused and the end has no effect. But any event, considered in itself, seems not to fit either description. Because the event is a representation of things that occur in real life, every event needs a cause and will have some effect. It seems then that to posit beginning and ending events of the kind that Aristotle describes is illegitimate given the mimetic character of events in a drama.

One might argue that there is a way to make sense of Aristotle's dictum by appeal to coincidences. Some events seem to be uncaused because of a confluence of factors; for example, discovering a treasure buried in the ground when digging for some other purpose; in this case, discovering the treasure is not strictly speaking caused by the choice to dig a well, since discovering treasure was not the intention aimed at by digging.[74] Such an occurrence, being without a cause, could thus qualify as the beginning event in a whole action.

Similarly, the ending event of an action could be without an effect because of an obstructing cause. Every cause has a necessary effect, but sublunary causes are also stoppable. To take an example from Greek tragedy, Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia* should be the cause of a further cycle of retribution, but Athena intervenes to impede it from having that effect and imposes a new law to replace blood feud.

But in both these cases, the account still falls short of Aristotle's own precepts. Each event depicted must form part of the causal chain. If it fails to, it must be considered irrational (*alogon*), and thus excluded from the plot. For this reason he

[74] On Aristotle's account of coincidences, see *Metaphysics* 6.3 and Sorabji 1980, chapter 1.

chastises Euripides for employing a *deus ex machina* in the *Medea*.[75] Coincidences by definition are irrational because no causal explanation can be given of them; likewise, an obstructing cause by definition intrudes on a causal chain but is not part of it (the obstructed cause moreover would become *alogon* by not having its proper effect). Only *pragmata* that are part of the causal chain go to making up the plot. Coincidences and obstructed causes seem to be the only means at hand to account for a beginning and end as Aristotle has defined them, but both are ruled out by his overarching concern that the plot have a fully rational structure.

2.3.3 The paradox of *Poetics* 9

The necessary connection of events explains only coherence, but the criteria he gives for completeness by having a beginning and end are mere assertions that under closer scrutiny turn out to be insufficient to account for completeness. Moreover, they provide no account of the qualities that are specifically tragic – namely, fear and pity and the catharsis of such emotions. Aristotle himself seems to recognize the limitations of the account in terms of relative necessity. At the end of *Poetics* 9 he presents the problem in the form of a paradox:

> Since tragic mimesis portrays not just a whole action, but events which are fearful and pitiful, this can best be achieved when things occur contrary to expectation yet still on account of one another. A sense of wonder will be more likely to be aroused in this way than as a result of the arbitrary or the fortuitous, since even chance events make the greatest impact of wonder when they *appear* to have a purpose (as in the case where Mitys's statue at Argos fell on Mitys's murderer and killed him, while he was looking at it: such things do not *seem* to happen without reason). So then, plots which embody this principle must be superior.[76]

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[75] 15.1454a36-b2.

[76] 9.1452a1-11, again replacing Halliwell's "plot-structures" with "plots." The parenthetical remark about Mitys refers to a play that is otherwise unknown.

The necessary and likely connections from event to event will mean that each event will occur according to expectation, but the specifically tragic elements of pity and fear are best realized when there is a reversal against expectation (*para ten doxan*). In short, the appeal to relative necessity provides only a generic account of dramatic action as the primary object of mimesis, but fall short of a specific account of tragedy.

2.4 Conclusion

A tragic action, like a physical body, is a whole only if it is coherent and complete. Relative necessity, to which Aristotle appeals in *Poetics* 7, is sufficient to account only for coherence, but does not account for the intrinsic limits in virtue of which a whole is complete. Moreover, although Aristotle defines tragedy as drama that arouses pity and fear, the account in *Poetics* 7 supplies no theoretical means to account for this, but only for rational apprehension of the causal connections between events; it is thus a generic account of drama, but not of tragedy specifically.

With the paradox at the end of *Poetics* 9, he makes the transition to the account of tragic action specifically. Having remarked already in *Poetics* 6 that tragedy is defined as the representation not only of a whole action, but also of pitiful and fearful things, Aristotle will need to explain how pity and fear can be reconciled with coherence of the action. The theoretical challenge will therefore be to reconcile an intelligible action made up of a series of causally connected events, with the reversal and recognition that make possible the specifically tragic effects of pity and fear.

In *Physics* 2.8, Aristotle attacks the materialist philosophers for trying to explain complex whole organisms exclusively in terms of the properties of the parts

that make it up, so that the whole organism is the result of the organic parts as efficient cause. He concludes that such an account is not adequate because it does not give any account of the whole in its own right as the final cause, which, he argues, has explanatory priority over the material cause.

A similar attack can be made on the account of dramatic plot in *Poetics* 7. The action is the composition of the events, which are in effect the material cause of the action. Each event is the efficient cause of the event that follows after it, and the result is necessary relative to it. A coherent series of events can emerge from such causal linkage, but there is no account of the action as intrinsically whole. Aristotle needs to move to a different point of view in order to show that the events are all joined together for the sake of the whole action. Only from the point of view of the whole action can Aristotle justify his description of the beginning and end of a sequence of events.

In the next chapter, I will propose an interpretation that will explain how a tragic action can have intrinsic limits. These limits will arise in terms of the same structure of development that will explain the integration of pity and fear into the action itself and their release in catharsis. It will also show how tragedy is differentiated as a species from drama as a genus and how the paradox in *Poetics* 9 might be resolved. This can be accomplished by following through the implications of Aristotle's remark that the plot is "like the soul" of tragedy. Rather than just an illustrative comparison, it can be treated as a fully structural analogy. The complexity of Aristotle's discussion of living organisms can thus be brought to bear on his account of tragic plot. Just as the simple account of structural coherence can be

grounded in Aristotle's theoretical discussion of relative necessity, so also his own critical sense of tragedy as a dynamic art can be grounded philosophically in a more subtle account of plot than he offers in *Poetics* 7, one which will appeal to a more nuanced account of necessity derived from his natural science and will explain how a tragic action can be complete in virtue of intrinsic limits, and thus truly be a whole.

3. Hypothetical Necessity and the Final Cause

3.0 Introduction

In the last chapter, I argued that Aristotle's apparently simple account of dramatic plot in *Poetics* 7 relies on a more elaborate logical apparatus than is usually noted. Aristotle attempts there to account for the wholeness of the action as a represented series of causally linked events. The account appeals to the notion of relative necessity, whereby an effect is necessary relative to an (unobstructed) cause. This gives a description of the coherence of events in an action, but fails to account for completeness. The inadequacy of the appeal to relative necessity arises directly from the mimetic nature of drama, which renders untenable Aristotle's account of beginning and end. Not only is the completeness of the action left unexplained, but also the account gives no space to the specifically tragic characteristics of pity, fear, and catharsis. The account in *Poetics* 7 of the action as a whole in its own right thus fails to account for its specifically tragic form. Aristotle acknowledges this difficulty with the paradox in *Poetics* 9, where he remarks that fear and pity are best achieved in tragedy when the outcome of the action occurs against expectation, yet also necessarily.

I will argue in this chapter that this paradox can be resolved by showing how the action is prior in explanation to the events that make it up. In *Poetics* 7, Aristotle attempts to explain the whole action as the result of coherence among all the events; the full account of drama must instead reverse the order of explanation, so that the presence of the events is explained by their being parts of a whole action. This can be accomplished by appeal to hypothetical necessity. The relevance of hypothetical

necessity in the *Poetics* can be established on the basis of the governing analogy of tragedy to a living animal and tragic plot to animal soul.

I will begin by showing how the need for a distinction can be set within the context of differentiation of species from genus. The account of plot coherence in *Poetics* 7 is an account of dramatic plot in general. This account is of drama as a genus, and must be differentiated for tragedy, which is a species of drama. Tragic plot therefore will still conform to the definition there, but will be differentiated in two related aspects: the reversal and recognition, and the emotions of fear and pity. These are not separate differentiae; rather, the specifically tragic effects of fear and pity are brought about by the incorporation of reversal and recognition within the plot.

The specific difference of tragedy from drama in general can be grounded in Aristotle's ontological framework of material causation and his division of necessity into relative necessity and hypothetical necessity. His view is that the material parts of a whole substance are ultimately explained in terms of its specific essence, which, as the final cause, is that for the sake of which material parts are present and (in the case of living organisms) develop in specific ways.

This framework can be used to fill out the account of tragic plot. The events that make up an action turn out to be analogous to the material cause; they therefore cannot form the basis of a fully scientific account. Instead, the relative necessity joining the *pragmata* into a coherent series is subsumed under an account of the whole action in itself. The events are necessarily present as the material cause, and can be explained scientifically only as hypothetically necessary to the whole of which they are parts.

This account provides an explanation of how pity and fear can be intrinsic to a tragic action, yet not in conflict with the general dramatic principle of coherence of the represented action. The appeal to hypothetical necessity will thus provide a resolution of the paradox in *Poetics* 9 by bringing together the imitative and productive aspects of mimesis into the explanation of tragic plot. The completeness of plot as a result of intrinsic limits is explained by the operation of hypothetical necessity in the actualization of the final cause of tragedy in the realization of tragic pity and fear within a whole action.

I will conclude by proposing an overall reading of the *Poetics* as a systematic and scientific treatise. The investigation culminates in *Poetics* 18 with an account of tragedy as a whole. The account in terms of complication and resolution (*desis* and *lusis*) is not, as many commentators have assumed, a new approach to the question of plot; rather, it is the result of a synthesis, and a proposal for describing tragedy (and drama in general) not simply as plot embodied in a play, but as the form of mimesis that is essentially emplotted.[77]

3.1 Tragedy as a species of drama

According to Aristotle's scientific method, a species can be derived as distinct by a process of differentiation from the widest genus. The last difference must be unified: that is, each differentia must be a qualification of the differentia above it. The feature that defines the species cannot simply be a property exhibited in addition to the generic properties; rather, it must be a differentia on the generic essence. If the

[77] I use "emplotment" in a very different sense from Hayden White, from whom I borrow the term. He means by emplotment the way in which historical writing is shaped according to various narrative modes analogous to traditional fictional genres of romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire (see White 1973). As I explain below, I mean by it that a tragedy is explained primarily as the actualization of a plot.

defining feature of drama is representation of a whole and unified action, then the defining feature of tragedy must be a specific differentiation of this.

The account in *Poetics* 7 in terms of coherence of plot has nothing to say about what differentiates tragedy as a species of drama. Aristotle has already stated that tragedy presents an action that involves pity and fear, and that these are part of the definition of tragedy. Since tragedy is a species of drama, it must represent an action that is a coherent series of events. It is not sufficient, however, just to posit that tragedy is a complete action that also is fearful and pitiable. Such a definition of tragedy is just the conjunction of two elements without any specific connection between them. It would fail as systematic differentiation because the specific difference must be one that is appropriate to the definition of the genus.[78]

A definition by differentia is not the addition of the specific difference to the generic essence, but the modification of it. What is needed is not just the addition of pity and fear to a completeness of action, but some account of how the action represented in a tragedy is complete *as* a representation of fearful and pitiable events. Since the generic account of drama is of the respect in which a dramatic action is whole, the specific account of tragedy must be an account of how an action is whole in a tragic way. Pity and fear must therefore be shown to be consistent with the coherence of events in a causal chain of necessity or likelihood. The tragic mode of plot coherence can then serve as the grounding of an account of how pity and fear are represented as properties of the action.

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[78] Husain 2002 observes that the tragic differentia consists of unified plot and catharsis of pity and fear, but she does not show how they are unified. What is lacking in her account of division from highest genus to lowest species is the genus of drama intervening between artistic mimesis and tragedy.

Since the generic account is made in terms of the action as a necessary whole, the account of tragedy must involve a specific difference of the whole action in virtue of which it is a tragic action, which in turn accounts for the distinction of tragedy as a whole from drama. Aristotle offers only some hints as to what that account could be, and seems to be satisfied with the account of dramatic plot as a coherent sequence of events. A more subtle account will be required to deal with the remark in *Poetics* 9 that the best tragic plot is one in which the generic requirement of necessary causation is retained, but such that the outcome of the action is unexpected. In this way, fear is most effectively brought about, because an outcome in suffering is foreseeable as a possibility; and pity is most effectively brought about by an unforeseen reversal resulting in suffering.

The account of the action as a sequence of necessarily connected events leaves no room to account for how fear and pity can be part of the plot. If the plot is just a sequence of events in which each event is the necessitated outcome of the previous event, then the reversal should be foreseeable, and there would be no way to account for a reversal against expectation. Fear and pity are integrated with the action in terms of reversal and recognition, which Aristotle treats as integral to the tragic plot. Some account is therefore required of how the continuous necessary sequence of events described in *Poetics* 7 can be reconciled with the complex structure of the whole action that Aristotle recommends as the fullest realization of tragedy. The relative necessity at work between events in a dramatic action must be complemented by an account of these events as parts of the whole action and explained in terms of the whole by hypothetical necessity.

3.2 Explanatory priority of the whole action

If Aristotle is applying the same general principles he uses to explain other complex entities, the account in *Poetics* 7 falls short of a scientific account. There, he treats the whole action only as the result of the interaction among the events that are its parts. Not only does the account there violate his general scientific principles, but also it fails to account for specifically tragic properties of the whole action, such as fear and pity. What he seems to need instead is some account of the whole action, and then of how the events can be explained in terms of that whole. This can be provided by appeal to hypothetical necessity.

3.2.1 Hypothetical necessity

Throughout his writings, Aristotle is unequivocal on the explanatory priority of the whole over its parts. In *Politics* 1.2, for example, he asserts that "the state is by nature clearly prior to the family and to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part." He goes on to explain why parts can be spoken of properly only in relation to the whole to which they belong:

> For example, if the whole body be destroyed, there will be no foot or hand, except in an equivocal sense, as we might speak of a stone hand; for when destroyed the hand will be no better than that. But things are defined by their working and power; and we ought not to say that they are the same when they no longer have their proper quality, but only that they have the same name.[79]

A hand is really a hand only if it is part of a living animal, because the definition of a hand is an account of the function it performs for the living animal; and, in general, the constituent parts of a larger whole are in a sense explicable only in relation to the whole to which they belong.

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[79] *Politics* 1.2.1253a19-25. tr. B. Jowett in McKeon 1941.

Aristotle argues for the priority of the whole over the part by developing the concept of hypothetical necessity. He develops it most fully in his biological investigations. He states the issue most clearly in the *Parts of Animals*, where he considers what can serve as the cause that grounds explanation of the composition of an organism. He begins by asserting that it is clearly the final cause that must be appealed to:

> The causes concerned in the generation of the works of nature are, as we see more than one. There is the final cause and the motor [i.e. efficient] cause. Now we must decide which of these two causes comes first, which second. Plainly, however, that cause is first which we call the final one. For this is the Reason (*logos*), and the Reason forms the starting-point, alike in the works of art and the works of nature.[80]

Further on, he discusses how this distinction is played out in terms of necessity:

> The mode of necessity, however, and the mode of ratiocination are different in natural science from what they are in the theoretical sciences; of which we have spoken elsewhere. For in the latter the starting-point is that which is; in the former that which is to be. For it is that which is to be – health, let us say, or a man – that, owing to its being of such and such characters, necessitates the pre-existence or previous production of this or that antecedent; and not this or that antecedent which, because it exists or has been generated, makes it necessary that health or a man is in, or shall come into, existence.[81]

In natural science, the more complete actuality, such as health or a healthy organism, is not explained by the steps or parts that may be temporally or materially prior; instead, the presence of the parts that make up the whole, or the steps taken to achieve an actuality, are explained by reference to the whole or the final cause. The parts that are hypothetically necessary for some goal are explained in terms of the end.

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[80] *Parts of Animals* 1.1.639b11-16. tr William Ogle in McKeon 1941.
[81] *Parts of Animals* 1.1.639b34-640a8.

In general, Aristotle privileges wholes over parts, and final causes over material causes. In *Physics* 2.8 he raises the question whether the development of the parts of an animal can be explained entirely by the necessity in the matter: just as rain does not fall for the sake of watering crops, so perhaps the development of the teeth and other animal parts might not need to appeal to any final cause:

> Why then should it not be the same with the parts in nature, e.g. that our teeth should come up of necessity –the front teeth sharp, fitted for tearing the molars broad and useful for grinding down food—since they did not arise for this end, but it was merely a coincident result; and so with all other parts in which we suppose that there is a purpose? Wherever then all the parts came about just what they would have been if they had come to be for an end, such things survived, being organized spontaneously in a fitting way.[82]

A sort of account of a whole can be made in terms of its parts and how they develop from their materials and interact with each other. But appeal to material causes is not enough to explain the regularity and predictability of such development and interaction:

> Yet it is impossible that this should be the true view. For teeth and all other natural things either invariable or normally come about in a given way; but of not one of the results of chance or spontaneity is this true. [...] If then, it is agreed that things are either the result of coincidence or for an end, it follows that they must be for an end; and that such things are due to nature even the champions of the theory which is before us would agree. Therefore action for an end is present in things which come to be and are by nature.[83]

In Aristotle's view, the material parts of living things as well as of artifacts are for an end, and so the whole as the final cause has priority in the order of explanation over material parts.[84]

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[82] *Physics* 2.8.198b23-31, tr. R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye in McKeon 1941.
[83] *Physics* 2.8.198b34-199a8.
[84] See Cooper 1987 for an extended discussion of these passages and of hypothetical necessity in nature.

3.2.2 Tragedy and hypothetical necessity

Viewing drama from the point of view of relative necessity results only in a simple chain of unbroken necessary causation. Such a view also excludes the possibility of surprise that Aristotle extols as the mark of the best tragedies: if a play is viewed only as a sequence of events, then every effect, if caused necessarily or probably, will be foreseeable. With hypothetical necessity, on the other hand, the view is not from the events that make up the tragedy, but from the tragedy as a whole. If the events stand to the action as the organs stand to the whole animal, then, just as the organs are properly organs if they are part of a living animal, then the events that make up a dramatic action are not properly events unless they are part of a whole action.

The appeal to hypothetical necessity in accounting for the wholeness of the action brings together the two levels of mimesis. It operates at the level of mimetic object to explain how the represented object can be bounded and complete, as well as coherent; but this way of accounting for wholeness of the action depends on the very fact that it is not just an action that happens to be imitated on the stage, but also itself a mimetic artifact. If the representation is a single whole, and if the representation is isomorphic with its object (as on Aristotle's basic sense of mimesis it must be), then the object too must be one and whole. The plot then is the representation of a whole and complete action. This is the established starting point of the investigation, and will not be lost in any analysis. The *praxis* is made up of *pragmata*, but only as the material cause. The fact that an action is made up of a series of events therefore does not replace the *praxis* with the *pragmata* as the basis of the scientific explanation;

such an explanation must be based on the definition, which is a statement of the formal cause.

Aristotle seems content in *Poetics* 7 to account for unity of action by appeal to relative necessity so that all the events are linked in a continuous causal chain. He also seems to take it that the link with the simplest form of mimesis is through the events: each is an imitation of a human act, so that similarity to real life can be recognized. The reason why Aristotle makes this the link lies in his insistence that mimesis is best when it imitates (in the primitive sense), and that narration is second best. Enactment preserves the primitive sense of mimesis as imitative mimicking that is lost in narration. Enactment maintains the structural similarity to human acts, in a way that narration does not, since a narration lacks the direct structural similarity to an action that enactment possesses.[85]

There are two limitations in this account of wholeness of action. First, the appeal to relative necessity cannot account for boundedness of action, and this is a direct result of the mimeticism that Aristotle demands. Each act in a drama is both caused by a previous act and is the cause of a subsequent act; this is possible because each dramatic act not only is a representation of a real act, but is also imitative of a real act as part of a causal chain: it must have a cause (unless it is a coincidence) and must cause something further (unless its natural effect is prevented by an external obstruction). Secondly, relative necessity leaves room only to insist that the whole action is exactly co-extensive with the events represented in the play, and in the order

[85] Compare with Aristotle's remark on the capacity of music to represent character traits and emotions (1.1447a26-27): this must be at the level of structure and movement, since sounds alone seem to have no similarity to properties and affections of the soul. See Halliwell 2002, especially chapter 8.

in which they are represented. This would result in so stringent a standard of causal coherence in tragic drama that no actual tragedy could live up to it.[86]

The appeal to hypothetical necessity, on the other hand, opens the way to a theory of a plot that is the representation of an action that need not be coextensive with the dramatic mimesis. According to relative necessity, an action begins with the first event in a causal chain, and since Aristotle excludes unconnected episodes from the best tragic mimesis, there is no option but for this to be the first event represented in the drama. According to hypothetical necessity, on the other hand, a tragedy just is the representation of a single complete action, and this governs the structuring of all the events represented.

3.2.3 Reversal and recognition

In the paradox in *Poetics* 9, Aristotle observes that the tragic effects of pity and fear are best achieved when an outcome occurs unexpectedly yet still is necessitated as part of a connected series of events. He is thus importing into the account of efficient causation within the content of representation some hint of the final cause embodied in the whole: the events must be a necessary series, but the *telos* is a whole action that includes fearful and pitiable elements. Since these must be achieved within the structure of the action, but a continuous unarticulated sequence of events seems incapable of incorporating such affective properties, some further account of plot is required.

The introduction of complex plots in *Poetics* 10 follows logically as an answer to the paradox:

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[86] On this point, see Frede 1992, 205.

> By a simple action I mean one which is, as earlier defined, continuous and unitary, but whose transformation occurs without reversal and recognition. A complex action is one whose transformation involves recognition or reversal or both; Reversal and recognition should arise from the intrinsic structure of the plot, so that what results follows by either necessity or probability from the preceding events.[87]

With the reiteration of the importance of a necessary sequence of events, Aristotle shows that he is developing the account of plot coherence, but with the introduction of reversal and recognition he is showing how the plot can nevertheless show internal articulation as a whole.

Moreover, reversal and recognition are intended as the way in which pity and fear are integrated into the action. Aristotle first explains what he means by the terms. A reversal is "a complete swing in the direction of the action," yet still according to necessity and likelihood, such as in the *Oedipus Rex* when a messenger comes to reassure Oedipus, but instead reveals to him that he himself is the murderer that he is seeking.[88] A recognition, on the other hand, is a change from ignorance to knowledge. Reversal and recognition are best when they happen together because they are in that way most integral to plot: "For such a combination of recognition and reversal will produce pity and fear (and it is events of this kind that tragedy, on our definition, is a mimesis of), since both affliction and prosperity will hinge on such circumstances."[89] The final cause of tragedy, a whole action that involves pity and fear, is thus closely tied to the way in which the direction of the necessary sequence is articulated by reversal and recognition into a complex plot.

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[87] 10.1452a14-20.
[88] 11.1452a22-26.
[89] 11.1452a36-b3.

In *Poetics* 13 and 14 Aristotle divides the various kinds of tragic plot. There is considerable debate on the details of these two chapters, particularly over whether the two rankings of kinds tragic plot are compatible with one another.[90] The significance of the discussion to the development of the overall account of tragedy is that the plots are divided according to the affective properties each kind has. These affective properties are explained in relation to the different outcomes that can arise for different kinds of agent. Thus, although Aristotle seems to descend in these chapters to a highly empirical level, with a relatively high density of reference to fifth century Attic tragedy (this has perhaps been a major factor in why this discussion has received more attention from philologists than from philosophers), the discussion is in fact an amplification and clarification of how pity and fear are integrated into the structure of the whole action, and a continuation of his theoretical account of the tragic plot as a complex structure in which pity and fear are integrated.[91]

3.3 Tragedy as an emplotted whole

The analogy of plot to soul provides a way of making sense of the underlying action as intrinsically whole. The plot of a tragedy is not just a blueprint of the play, with the details to be filled in later: it is also the full realization and actuality of the tragedy. If the action is described only as a concatenation of events, there is no accounting for beginning and end. The events are instead the necessary substratum of a whole action, and should be understood not in themselves but as elements in a

[90] See White 1992 for a useful discussion of Aristotle's ranking of tragedies in these chapters, and how the two chapters relate to each other.

[91] In *Poetics* 12, Aristotle briefly lists the quantitative parts of Athenian tragedy (prologue, episode, exode, and chorus). This chapter is often taken as an interpolation. It does not advance the argument, but there still may be a reason for it here: Aristotle is moving beyond the general account of plot to how it occurs in actual tragedies, and so may feel the need to deal with dramaturgical elements, only to set them aside as irrelevant to his essentialist account centred on representation of an action.

pattern of action. The action is grasped as whole and complete pattern, given shape by reversal and recognition, and realized as complication and resolution. It is discerned in the temporally extended performance (or reading), and discovered as the formative principle of tragedy through its full realization in the performance. What this comes down to is an explanation of why a plot summary is not a plot.

3.3.1 Plot as the soul

In *De Anima*, Aristotle comments on the different senses in which soul can be taken. In one sense, it is the formal cause of the living animal, and the element that makes the potentially living body into an actual animal: "The soul is actuality in the sense corresponding to the power of sight and the power in the tool; the body corresponds to what exists in potentiality; as the pupil plus the power of sight constitutes the eye, so the soul plus the body constitutes the animal."[92] So from one point of view, the soul and the body are two elements that come together to form the whole particular. However, Aristotle frames this in terms of potentiality and actuality:

> We can wholly dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and body are one: it is as meaningless to ask whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one, or generally the matter of a thing and that of which it is the matter. Unity has many senses (as many as 'is' has), but the most proper and fundamental sense of both is the relation of an actuality to that of which it is the actuality.[93]

The soul is thus the full realization of the potentiality of its body; it is in this sense the *completion* of the body.

Organisms have their principle and origin of change in their soul, which is both the formal and final cause. Tragedy is an artifact, but it is not like other kinds of artifact, since its final cause is the representation of an action. Perhaps what

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[92] *De Anima* 2.1.413a1-3. tr. J. A. Smith in McKeon 1941.
[93] *De Anima* 2.1412b6-9.

influences Aristotle to say that the plot is like the soul is just that tragedy is temporally extended. Although from the point of view of the poet, a tragedy is a structure deliberately worked up from a series of events, and in that sense an artifact, it is also in essence the representation of an action that has intrinsic limits and undergoes a process of coming to be. Just in virtue of being temporally extended, it seems like a living thing. This is not the same sort of temporal extension as an artifact, which comes to be at a certain moment and ceases to be at a certain moment (this also is true of living things); rather, its temporal extension is inseparable from its very being as the representation of an action, which is the structuring into a whole of a series of events. Just as a living organism undergoes a process of development so that its nature as an instance of a certain species is gradually actualized, so the tragedy, as essentially emplotted, gradually reveals the represented action, which is its full actuality. This action is most fully actual at the point of reversal and recognition. Unlike other kinds of artifact, the drama undergoes a process of development, which is intrinsic to it; this is why the plot is "like the soul" of tragedy in a way that the formal cause of a house is not. A tragedy most fully becomes a tragedy only when the wholeness of its action is revealed.

The distinction between the plot as the representation of an action and the plot as the structuring principle of a drama is like the distinction between the soul as the full actuality of the organism and the soul as the formal cause of the organism. This is not a redefinition of plot, but a consequence of plot as the quasi-soul of tragedy. The account of plot as formal cause differs from the account of plot as final cause, but they are not separable.

It is important to hold these two aspects together in any interpretation of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Either alone will reduce his theory of plot to one of mere apprehension of an abstract whole from which the realization through mimesis can be discarded; the tension between the two makes possible an account of drama as a process. The whole action is realized in a temporally extended mimesis, and this process is what explains the wonder that Aristotle sees as the true appeal of tragedy. The appeal of tragedy for philosopher and layman alike is that to understand a tragedy involves cognition of whole entities and of their defining essence in a process that occurs in mortal, time-bound existence.

The analogy of plot to soul provides a way of making sense of the underlying action as intrinsically whole. If the action is described only as a concatenation of events, there is no accounting for beginning and end. The events are instead the necessary substratum of a whole action, and should be understood not in themselves but as elements in a pattern of action. The action is grasped as whole and complete pattern, given shape by reversal and recognition, and realized as complication and resolution. It is discerned in the temporally extended performance (or reading), and discovered as the formative principle of tragedy through its full realization in the performance.

In a way, this is an explanation of why a plot summary is only one aspect of the plot. The whole structure of a sequence of events can be viewed as the essence that the playwright realizes in a whole tragedy by working up the "matter" of events into a whole, just as a craftsman works up raw materials into an artifact. A tragedy, however, has emotive properties of pity and fear, which are most effectively brought

about through reversal, recognition, and suffering. Since these are possible only through the temporally extended unfolding of events, the truly tragic plot is not just the sequence of events that can be summarized apart from a performance, but is instead full realization of an actual tragedy.[94]

3.3.2 Plot as the final cause

Initially, Aristotle draws a careful distinction between the plot as representation and the action as represented object. Aristotle makes it clear when he says that the plot (*muthos*) is the mimesis of the action. Thus, the discussion in *Poetics* 7 to 9 about coherence of plot is, strictly speaking, about coherence of action. Since the plot is the representation of an action, it would seem that the action is ontologically prior to the plot: that which is represented exists apart from that which represents it. However, this simply is not so, as Aristotle recognizes when he remarks that the highest achievement for the poet is the composition of actions.[95]

There is a reason for this: the tragic action must have the limits of beginning and end, and these must be natural to the action itself. If a tragic action is merely imitative of a sequence of events like real life, it cannot have these intrinsic limits; but the plot represents not merely a sequence of events, but a pattern of events, and since the action is a pattern it can be bounded in the required way. Furthermore, this pattern is the product of the playwright's craft, and so the boundedness of the represented action results precisely from the fact that it is a representation.

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[94] Cf. D. H. Roberts remarks about the narration of past events in relation to *Rhetoric* 3.16.1417a12-16: "A story told as happening has a considerably different effect from one told as completed, and it is the former that elicits the traditional tragic response." (Roberts 1992, 144)

[95] 6.1450a35-38.

Because the limits of the action are explained by the fact that the action is represented, the action is not strictly prior to its representation, but exists as a representation. Thus, the tragic action and the plot are not so easily separated as an object and an imitation of it: the action is bounded in virtue of being the plot of a tragedy. It thus has a double existence: it is the object of mimesis (and so it is ontologically prior to the mimesis), but is a whole in virtue of the mimesis (and so the mimesis is ontologically prior to the action).

One way of resolving the paradox is to pursue the analogy with living organisms. In one way, the existence of the whole organism can be explained in terms of the natural tendencies of its constituent parts to come together: the whole animal is relatively necessary given the existence of the proximate matter, which will tend to behave in certain ways. This is analogous to the account in the *Poetics* of how an action is whole: one event causes the next, resulting in a coherent causal chain.

But this is not an adequate account of plot coherence because it cannot account for how the action is a whole. Similarly, the account of organisms in terms of the efficient causation inherent in its elements is not enough to explain the whole organism. One argument that Aristotle brings against such an account is that it appeals to coincidence: the constituent matters of the organism happen to cohere to make a whole animal. Aristotle rejects this because it ends up as a self-contradictory account: the coincidences happen regularly enough that there are organisms, and species persist. But a chance occurrence is one that goes against what happens for the most part. Since the propagation of the species does happen for the most part, it cannot be happening by chance. Aristotle's other objection is that the efficient

causation of constituent matter is not enough to explain the existence of a species. What is needed is a formal cause: that in virtue of which particular organisms are the kind of animal they are: that is, the specific form.

Moreover, biology is, for Aristotle, teleological. The specific form is also for the sake of which the individuals are propagated and for the sake of which the materials are regularly organized in a certain way; that is, the specific form is the final cause. The existence of the species is given, but the full development of the species in an individual requires the existence of matter of a certain kind so that it can be actualized. In other words, the organs, etc. are hypothetically necessary for the actuality of the species in an individual.

The coherent action has a similar structure. Tragedy is a species of mimesis that primarily represents an action. The plot must be coherent and so the action must be coherent. Since the coherent action (*praxis*) is established as the object of mimesis, and since it is also established that the action is made of events (*pragmata*) as its parts, the *pragmata* are hypothetically necessary for the existence of the *praxis*. Thus, if tragedy is viewed teleologically, it is no longer to be investigated whether an action can be coherent: this is established from the start in the fact that representation of a whole action is the final cause of drama. Rather, the investigation must be instead directed towards how it is possible for the action to be coherent if it is made of events.

There are two main consequences of the appeal to hypothetical necessity in interpreting Aristotle's theory of plot. First, it establishes the explanatory priority of the action to the events from which it is composed. In one sense, the whole action emerges from the links of causation by relative necessity from event to event, and so

the events are, at least in order of development prior to the action. But because the events are the material cause, and so cannot form the basis of a reasoned account of the action, it is instead the action that explains the presence of the events: they are hypothetically necessary as elements of a complex whole, which has explanatory priority. The coherence of the action arises from the efficient causation from represented event to event, but it is explained by the fact that the whole action is represented by the mimetic element (plot) that is essential and definitory of drama.

Secondly, the prior coherence of the action helps to explain how the tragic properties of fear and pity are intrinsic to the action itself, and to its structure. The audience expects the play to have a coherent action and anticipates the completion of it.[96] In this sense, *telos* has two senses that coincide: as the ending limit of the action, and as the completion of the action. Emotional involvement of the audience is the extrinsic correlate of the pitiful and fearful structure of the plot (or emplotted action). The point of rational apprehension of the tragedy is, in terms of the tragic plot, the reversal. The wholeness of the action is realized at the moment when the previous course of action can be articulated as a logical (rationally apprehensible) causal sequence leading up to the reversal, and the conclusion can be forecast as the necessary outcome of the reversal. This will also provide some support for Aristotle's contention that a tragedy is best according to two aspects of the reversal: it occurs at the same time as recognition, and it occurs against expectation.

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[96] The extrinsic reaction of the audience of course cannot be the explanation of the wholeness of the action, since this would be to explain tragedy as a property of the audience's soul. It is, however a sign of it: the action can be apprehended as a whole because it is a whole in its own right. Modrak 2001 argues extensively for the mutual support in Aristotle's philosophy between ontology and epistemology.

3.4 The systematic account of tragedy

The account of tragedy according to distinctions that Aristotle makes in his natural science has led to an account of plot as the final cause of tragedy in a way analogous to the way in which the soul is the final cause of an animal. In this way it is possible to discern an overall progression in the account of tragedy that culminates in a synthesis that shows how plot is that for the sake of which all elements of a tragedy are in place.

Having established that plot is the defining essence of drama, Aristotle then fully investigates the internal constitution of the action it represents. With the introduction of the complex plot with reversal and recognition in *Poetics* 10 and 11, he shows how the specifically tragic properties of pity and fear can be integrated into the action in virtue of the way in which the action is articulated. The species form is thus introduced as a formal cause that guides the material development of the action, even though its parts can also be described according to the relative necessity exhibited among the parts.

Thus, it is possible to see *Poetics* 13 and 14 as a continuation of the systematic investigation, rather than as an empirical, literary-critical study. The generic essence of drama has been determined to be whole and unified plot, but some account is still needed of the specifically tragic. The issue to be determined is now not what defines drama, or what plot is, but what are the affective properties specific to tragedy, and how they are achieved. These affective properties are enumerated in terms of the kinds of action that can be represented in a tragedy. These actions are differentiated in terms of the kinds of reversal found in the action.

In *Poetics* 17, Aristotle briefly discusses the way in which a tragedian should compose a play, holding before the mind's eye an overall sketch of the action. Regardless of whether this is a realistic picture of the playwright's actual practice, the significance of its position after the full account of plot articulation is as the formal cause that guides the development of a concrete whole. It is the formal cause in a way analogous to how the species form transmitted from parent to offspring is the formal cause that determines the growth of the child.

In *Poetics* 18, Aristotle is no longer investigating plot, but has returned to the investigation of tragedy as a concrete whole, but now with the benefit of the analysis that has been made up to this point. The nature of tragedy has been established as representation of one complete and coherent action -- in other words, the essence of tragedy is plot – but also as an action in which a fearful and pitiable reversal takes place. With the essence determined, tragedy can then be investigated as a concrete whole in which this essential feature is realized. Thus, although the subject matter is the whole tragedy, as it was in *Poetics* 6, the investigation is now scientific because it is undertaken not according to what appears to be so and is most evident to us, but in terms of what is necessarily the case and evident in itself.

Aristotle begins *Poetics* 18 by introducing a new pair of technical terms:

> For every tragedy there is a complication (*desis*) and a dénouement (*lusis*): the complication consists of events outside the play, and often some of those within it; the denouement comprises the remainder. By the 'complication' I mean everything from the beginning as far as the part which immediately precedes the transformation to prosperity or affliction; and by 'denouement' I mean the section from the start of the transformation to the end.[97]

[97] 18.1455b24-29.

Desis and *lusis* are not a new description of plot, but of the whole tragedy as "embodying" an action. Contrary to many modern commentators, who treat *Poetics* 18 as a new approach to plot, I take it that this chapter is an account of tragedy as emplotted.[98] There are two senses to this. First, a tragedy is emplotted in the sense that tragedy is a form of mimesis that is primarily representation of a complete action. A tragedy is action driven, not character-driven or theme-driven. Since all elements are at the service of the action and a plot is the representation of an action, a tragedy is emplotted in the sense that all the discernible elements of an actual tragedy are at the service of representing a plot.

In the second sense, a tragedy is emplotted because the action that is represented is not a segment of a larger stream of action separated out in some arbitrary fashion. Rather, the action itself is shaped as a whole in itself, which means that the bounds of the action are intrinsic to it. Insofar as an action is the unifying element of a mimesis, it has itself become a unity, no longer as action, but as a represented action, that is, the action that is the object of mimesis is emplotted as a whole by being represented as a coherent whole. It is thus not a new start or unconnected lecture, but part of the overall progression of the treatise. The account in terms of *desis* and *lusis* (complication and resolution) is of the shape of a whole realized tragedy.[99]

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[98] Halliwell, for example, says that *Poetics* 18 reopens the question answered in *Poetics* 7 (Halliwell 1987, 150). Else suspects that Aristotle is on the verge of a "truly comprehensive grasp of drama in its multiplicity and variety as well as its underlying unity" (Else 1967, 539-40) but does not seem to think of 18 as a completion of what has preceded it.

[99] The view that *desis* and *lusis* refer to the tragedy as a whole can already be found in the 1550 commentary by Maggi and Lombardi. They consider it uncontroversial that Aristotle is speaking of *desis* (or *ploke*) and *lusis* in contrast to plot. In contemporary scholarship, however, the textual basis of the distinction has been emended away, so that the remark about *ploke* and *lusis* is made to be an *explanation of* plot. The relevant passage is at 18.1456a7-9: "And it is just to call one tragedy the same

Since tragic plot is structured around a reversal and recognition, this point forms a pivot around which the whole action turns. Reversal and recognition are defined as the point at which the sequence of events represented change direction to the opposite of what had been the direction. They are also the point at which the true structure of causality is revealed. *Desis* and *lusis* can thus be interpreted as the realization in the tragedy as a temporally extended whole of the reversal and recognition as the pivot of the whole action: the *desis* is the action beginning with the start of the chain of events that lead up to a reversal, and the *lusis* is the sequence of events that result directly from the reversal.

This is why the best plot is one that combines causal coherence with unexpectedness: the wonder that proceeds from coming to know what the action is as a whole is greatest when the coming to know is most sudden. The beginning of the action is retroactively determined as the point from which the action turns out to have begun to move towards the reversal. Thus, Aristotle can assert that some of the *desis* is outside the drama, when the true course of action turns out to be before the first event represented on stage (although this interpretation would also allow for a *desis* that begins after the beginning of the play). Similarly, at the point of reversal the outcome of the action is no longer in doubt and the action advances towards it with seeming inexorability: the ending limit is thus a function of the reversal. The *lusis* includes all the necessary results of the reversal, and is concluded when the necessity

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as another, but perhaps not with respect to the plot; but this [can be said] of those of which there is the same complication (*ploke*) and resolution." (my translation) See Maggi and Lombardi 1550 191-199 (especially Lombardi's comment at 197), and compare their text and Latin translation with the textual apparatus in Lucas 1968. The crucial change in Lucas's text (taken from Kassel's Oxford Classical Texts edition) is from "*ouden isos toi muthoi*" to "*oudeni hos toi muthoi* (in no respect so much as in respect of the plot)."

relative to the reversal is played out. Although the action as the content of mimesis continues right up to the end of the play (as a matter of plain observation), the action around which the tragedy is structured as a cognizable whole is concluded in relation to the reversal. On this view, the whole action is usually concluded before the end of the play, with a prophecy about how things turn out in the long term reserved for a god, as typically happens in Euripides.[100]

3.5 Conclusions

In this chapter I have drawn out the implications of Aristotle's remark that the plot is tantamount to the soul of tragedy. The account in *Poetics* 7-9 of plot in terms of relative necessity turns out to be inadequate either to give a full account of wholeness, of the action or to explain how the tragic properties of fear and pity are integrated with the action. The appeal to hypothetical necessity helps to resolve some of these questions by showing how the relative necessity among the *pragmata* is ultimately subsumed under an account of the whole action as the final cause of tragedy, which, as the specific form, guides the way a plot is articulated as a tragic action.

One advantage of this reading of the *Poetics* is that it provides an explanation of the technical sense of mimesis that Aristotle develops from out of the basic sense of imitation. The poet both represents actions and constructs them. As something that

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[100] On this interpretation then, Aristotle seems not to have fully thought through the implications of his theory. He says at 18.1445b28-32 that the *lusis* continues from the reversal up to the end (*mekhri telous*), presumably the end of the play. I suggest that in general it will end before the end of the play, with the rest taken up with placing the whole action within a larger context, typically by means a prophecy of how things will turn out in the long term. If he had allowed for a *lusis* that ends before the end of the drama, he might not have been so hard on Euripides for his use of the *deus ex machina* in the *Medea*, for it actually would occur after the intrinsic end of the whole action. His objection seems to be that it involves Medea herself and not just a god who is outside the course of the human action represented.

is represented, the dramatic action must be ontologically prior to that which represents it. It is coherent in virtue of the relative necessity of the causal relationships between successive events represented in a drama, so that the whole action is a continuous causal chain. Relative necessity thus describes only the object of mimesis, but not the product of mimesis. However, since tragedy is also a craft activity, a tragic drama is a whole in virtue of being a craft product. Since it is a mimetic craft, it is unified in virtue of the primary object of mimesis, the action. From this point of view, the priority is reversed: as a craft product, the tragedy is known to be a whole. Since a tragedy is primarily an action, the primary task of the playwright is to compose the action. In this sense, the action is not prior to the tragedy as the object of imitation, but comes into existence because of the tragedy. The poet does not just represent an action, but also composes it; for Aristotle, this is the sense in which a poet deserves the name *poietes* ("maker").

This interpretation also makes it possible to discern a more coherent progression in the argument of the *Poetics* than is usually noted. Far from being a series of loosely connected lectures, or even an additive account of tragedy from different critical perspectives, the treatise makes a systematic progress from analysis, to discussion of essential properties, to synthesis in light of the scientific basis established. The scope of investigation is first narrowed dialectically by appeal to analysis of known forms of mimesis, observations of the historical development of tragedy, and appeal to human nature; plot as the defining and unifying element is then investigated in its own right; and the articulated essential account is finally brought

back to the concrete whole to provide a scientific account of how the structure of a whole drama is determined by its specific formal and final cause.

4. Conclusion

In this thesis, I have attempted to show that the *Poetics* can profitably be viewed as a scientific treatise that investigates a distinct object according to its own proper nature. From the point of view of Aristotelian philosophy, this will seem like an obvious point to make; scholarship on the *Poetics*, however, has been deeply coloured by its subject matter, tragedy. The treatise has therefore been investigated largely by literary scholars, and it has been dealt with largely in isolation from the rest of the Aristotelian corpus, or at best only in relation to what we might now call Aristotle's social science: the *Ethics*, the *Politics*, and the *Rhetoric*.

However, the investigation that Aristotle carries out in the *Poetics* is of tragedy as a species of mimesis with its own intrinsic properties. The treatise is therefore largely devoted to showing in what sense a tragedy is a unified entity according to its internal structure, rather than in relation to extrinsic factors. Such an approach is entirely in keeping with Aristotle's broader ontological system. His overarching concern is with essence as the element according to which natural substances are unified and can be objects of knowledge.

Aristotle approaches tragedy as a distinct species of mimesis that can be accounted for according to its intrinsic properties. Any extrinsic properties therefore are secondary and are to be explained in terms of the intrinsic. Thus, the emotional effect on the audience results when the viewer of a tragedy grasps the emotional properties that inhere in the play's own structure. Any account of the social or moral usefulness of tragedy, moreover, is not within the scope of the investigation in the *Poetics*. Appeal to remarks about drama in other texts (such as in the *Politics*) should

be carefully circumscribed by attention to the context in which they are made. In the *Politics* for example, Aristotle is dealing with the constitution of a society and state. His remarks about tragedy are concerned with it as an expression of the culture and as a leisure activity enjoyed communally by citizens. In the *Poetics* on the other hand, he is engaged in an essentialist account of tragedy in itself and of its intrinsic principles of composition. The external ends of tragedy do not enter into this account, except insofar as they are made possible by tragedy's internal structure. Although tragedy necessarily represents character and thought, these are strictly subsumed to representation of an action as elements within the causal structure of the action. Thus, although criticism of tragedy will legitimately refer to ethical and rhetorical concerns, these are part of poetics only insofar as they are necessary conditions for representation of a coherent human action.[101]

Martha Husain's short work on *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy* has been a useful starting point for this thesis. She rightly emphasizes the connections of the *Poetics* with Aristotle's ontology, especially the account of substance in *Metaphysics* 7 and 8, as a way of explaining how Aristotle grounds his account of tragedy as essentially about plot. She stops short, however, of explaining how the general account of plot as a series of causally linked events can be reconciled with the specifically tragic effects of pity and fear. I have attempted to show that there is a way to reconcile them by following up the further ontological implications of Aristotle's remark that the plot is like the soul of tragedy.

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[101] David Bordwell makes a very similar argument for a poetics of film that stands midway between film criticism and film theory without being assimilated to either. See Bordwell 1989, especially 263-74.

By drawing out the implications of this, one can argue that the plot has different senses in Aristotle's tragic theory, just as the soul has different senses in his biological theory. In particular, one can give a more nuanced account of the plot as the composition of the events, which is not just the plan realized by the playwright, nor just the sequence of events that are the simple object of mimesis, but the full realization of the actual tragedy.[102] Another suggestive result of the analogy of plot to soul is that a tragedy has certain life-like properties. A soul is the internal principle of change in virtue of which living things are distinguished from artifacts. Unlike most artifacts, a tragedy is realized as a temporally extended whole. The action is thus realized only as a whole through a process, and so a tragedy seems to develop by its own power towards the completion of its function in catharsis.

An exegetical result is that it is possible to discern a more coherent progression in the text than commentators have generally noted. Most commentators have interpreted *Poetics* 18 as a renewed attempt by Aristotle to come to a definition of plot. But by observing the ontological underpinnings of the treatise, one can discern an overall progression in a text sometimes treated as just a set of critical notes: Aristotle begins with observation and received opinion, then proceeds to the determination of a definition and an account of the essence, and concludes with the synthesis in *Poetics* 18, where the topic returns to tragedy as a whole, but now informed by a scientific account in terms of plot as its defining element. With the introduction of the terms of *desis* and *lusis*, Aristotle is not reopening the discussion

[102] Downing 1984 similarly suggests that *muthos* has several related senses in the *Poetics*; but whereas he derives his typology by applying contemporary formal analysis of narrative to the *Poetics*, I have attempted to show that the different senses of *muthos* can be explained from within the Aristotelian framework of the various kinds of causation.

of plot, which has already been concluded, but is applying the results of that discussion to tragedy as a whole. Tragedy as a species of mimesis is essentially emplotted, and is describable in a way that links the structure of the whole tragedy with the structure of its underlying action. Thus by following out the full implications of Aristotle's highly compressed remarks, one can discern a more coherent argument about tragedy than has typically been noted.

This is not, however, a merely exegetical point in aid of showing that the received text is basically coherent. The interpretation I offer can lead to some further conclusions, both for the interpretation of particular aspects of the *Poetics*, and for its place in the history of philosophy of art.

First, it offers another way to answer one of the more vexing questions in the scholarship on the *Poetics*: the meaning of catharsis. In particular, it turns out that tragic catharsis is a reconciliation of emotions and suffering with rational intelligibility. Emotions are aroused in the audience because the tragedy's plot is such as to include emotions within its incidents. Tragic emotions are present in the play because they are present in the plot, and so when the plot is concluded, the emotions are also concluded. Since the emotional effect of a tragedy is dependent on the structure of the action represented, the completion of the action results in the closure of emotion as well. The emotional effect in the audience is thus also concluded when the plot is completed. The plot is concluded by becoming a whole, and thus an object of knowledge. The emotions aroused by the plot are also concluded, and change from affections of the audience's soul into objects of knowledge; not as abstract knowledge

of ways in which the soul can be affected, but real knowledge derived from experience.

Catharsis in the context of the *Poetics* will therefore mean rational clarification. The emotions are rendered objects of knowledge through their completion as affections. The common interpretation of catharsis as purgation is thus not excluded: the discharge of painful emotions is made possible by their dependence on the plot, which emerges through the performance as a rationally apprehensible whole.[103]

Secondly, by drawing out the full implications of the comparison of plot to living soul, one can begin to account within Aristotle's own framework for how art actually works and why it is valuable, in Aristotelian terms, as a mode of cognizing universals that is not reducible to theoretical reflection. The *Poetics* is not merely a set of reflections on tragedy, but an attempt to explain an art form within a broader scientific and ontological framework. It thus provides an account of art not just as a social phenomenon, nor as something antithetical to philosophy, but as a distinct phenomenon worthy in its own right of serious philosophical attention.

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[103] Martha Nussbaum also takes the view that catharsis should be understood as clarification, but instead of treating it as an intrinsic feature of the tragedy, she explains it as a broader cognitive effect in the soul of the audience member of educational clarification of ethical possibilities (see Nussbaum 1992, 280-283). I do not argue that this is wrong; only that such a view goes beyond the scope of the *Poetics* as the account of tragedy as a self-subsistent entity.

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